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“Double Trouble: The Intersectionality of Women of Color in American Politics”

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by

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Abstract

Women of color make substantive contributions to American politics, yet they are continually underrepresented in the political sphere. Recent literature is divided on whether systematic barriers remain for women in American politics. Despite the continued debate on the research and findings on women seeking political office, there is no doubt that women of color face systematic biases and barriers in their campaigns and once elected. This thesis aims to answer whether mainstream political science literature adequately captures the barriers and biases faced by women of color at the intersection of race and gender.

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, ordinarily known as AOC, became the center of media attention from the onset of her political career. Her origin story was defined by her Puerto Rican heritage, experience working with the community, and progressive ideals. Utilizing Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's rise in American politics, this thesis demonstrates that political science literature fails to adequately account for the barriers, biases, and attacks women of color face in campaigns and once they have been elected. Even when it appears that political identification explains the attacks and biases they face, an intersectionality approach notes that the manifestation of the attacks is in particularly racialized and misogynous terms such that it considers women of color politicians as double trouble.

The study of women of color through an intersectional framework is specifically warranted because the literature on race or gender alone does not capture the challenges women of color face. Ocasio-Cortez's campaigns and post-election experience, categorized by racist and sexist episodes of attack, reveal that women of color face a drastically different political landscape than their white female and male counterparts in American politics. This thesis will shed light on the barriers and biases women of color face in the campaign process and once elected, through an intersectional analysis to understand the complexities of their challenges.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

“For me, a better democracy is a democracy where women do not only
have the right to vote and to elect but to be elected.”

—*Michelle Bachelet, Head of UN Women, Former
President, and Defense Minister of Chile*

(Torregrosa 2012).

This introductory chapter presents the role women of color play in bolstering the legitimacy of American democracy. It provides an overview of the history of women’s suffrage to explain why this conversation is important and discusses the recent rise of female candidates in American politics. The literature review elaborates on the division of mainstream political science literature on whether or not women face systematic barriers and bias when running for political office. It examines the work of Danny Hayes and Jennifer Lawless in “Women on the Run: Gender, Media and Political Campaigns in a Polarized Era.” Contrary to popular belief, Hayes and Lawless propose that women do not face substantial bias when running for political office in America. The chapter discusses Kira Sanbonmatsu’s “Women’s Underrepresentation in the U.S. Congress.” Sanbonmatsu asserts that although women in elective office-holding positions have made momentous strides, they are far from parity. It then evaluates the work of Cathy Cohen in “A Portrait of Continuing Marginality: The Study of Women of Color in American Politics,” in which she argues that women of color are largely invisible and calls for an intersectional approach to encompass women of color’s individualized experiences.

The literature review concludes with an analysis of the two-fold challenges women of color face, first as women and second as women of color. These challenges include but are not limited to higher rates of poverty, limited assets, funding difficulties, and structural barriers such as a lack of quotas and opportunities for new candidates. In addition, internalized expectations, disproportionate gender roles, stereotypical media coverage, and public opinion polls further negatively impact women of color in politics. Lastly, a summation of the contributions women of color add to American politics is discussed.

The following chapter is an in-depth case analysis of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's campaign and post-election experience. Her case study challenges the existing literature on gender and political representation in political science. It takes an in-depth intersectional analysis of the role her identity played in her political career and the sexist and racist episodes of attack she was prone to. Contrary to Hayes and Lawless' argument that women and men face very similar electoral landscapes, Ocasio-Cortez's political career exemplifies that, unfortunately, that is not the case for women of color. Ocasio-Cortez's campaign trail and post-election atmosphere were categorized by racial and gendered episodes of attacks and stereotypes, depicting the reality women of color face in American politics. While it appears that political identification explains the attacks and biases she faces, an intersectionality framework reveals that the manifestation of the attacks are through intentional racialized and misogynous terms.

As Cohen advocates for, an intersectional approach to fully understand the experiences of women of color is crucial. Ocasio-Cortez's case study reveals that women of color face a drastically different political landscape than their white female and male counterparts. From fellow Congress members calling her a "f*cking b*tch" to her peers labeling her as a "little girl," Ocasio-Cortez faced a very different political reality than her male counterparts. However, one

thing is clear, women of color are not welcomed in the political world and are prone to racist and sexist attacks based on their gender, race, and ethnicity. As Sanbonmatsu and Cohen explained, women of color are far from parity in American politics. There are additional barriers and biases at the intersection of race and gender that mainstream political science literature fails to account for. Lastly, this thesis concludes with a chapter summarizing the thesis' findings.

WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION IN AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

Vice President Kamala Harris highlighted the key link between women's leadership and strong democratic government: "The status of women is the status of democracy. The status of democracy also depends fundamentally on the empowerment of women. Not only because the exclusion of women in decision-making is a marker of flawed democracy, but because the participation of women strengthens democracy" (The White House 2021). The word "democracy" is of Greek origin and means "rule by the people." Democracy is known as a system of government where the citizens hold power, "a representative system of governance in which political candidates compete with one another for electoral support from citizens who choose who will hold political office" (McDonagh 2009:90-91). The importance of representation in a democracy is bolstered through the name held by House members as representatives.

America's democracy is a "representative democracy" in which citizens can impact laws through the election of specific candidates who propose and vote on legislation and policy initiatives on their behalf (Day 2021). Political representatives become the voice of their constituents and are accountable for advocating for their concerns. "The primary function of representative democracy is to represent the substantive interests of the represented through both

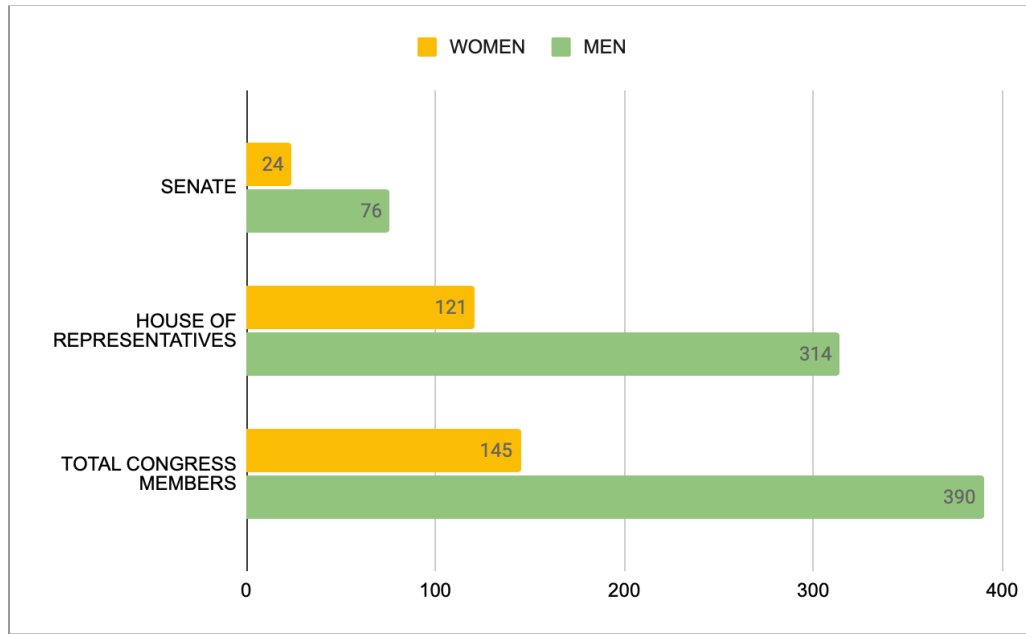
deliberation and aggregation” (Mansbridge 1999:630). The representatives within a democracy should represent the population as a whole, minorities, people of color, and those in between.

In “Gender and Elections: Shaping the Future of American Politics,” Susan J. Carroll and Richard L. Fox explain that although women constitute a majority of the electorate, they only represent a fraction of government representatives. “A government that is democratically organized cannot be truly legitimate if all its citizens from . . . both sexes do not have a potential interest in and opportunity for serving their community and nation” (Carroll and Fox 2006:5). A legitimate democracy is only considered representative of its constituents when representatives reflect its electorate. “This feeling of inclusion, in turn, makes the polity democratically more legitimate in one’s eyes” (Mansbridge 1999:651). Without the representation of minorities in a democracy, true democracy will never exist.

America lags behind most established democracies regarding women’s political representation. “When it comes to women’s representation in national legislatures, the United States’ rank has sunk from 41 in the world in 1997 to 101 in 2017” (Brechenmacher 2018). In comparison to Western European democracies that have similar democratic and socioeconomic indicators to America, Western European countries have made substantial progress. “Entrenched barriers to equal representation do persist, particularly at leadership levels, yet across Western Europe—including in Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, and the United Kingdom—women’s share of seats in national parliament now exceeds 30 percent” (Brechenmacher 2018). As of March 2022, women comprise 50.6% of the United States population (Country Meters). However, women only make up 27.1% of the United States Congress, with 24 women (24%) serving in the Senate and 121 women (27.8%) serving in the House of Representatives (Center for American Women and Politics). Even after the strides made

in favor of women in politics, the graph below depicts the sharp disconnect between the number of men and women serving in the current 2022 Congress.

Figure 1. Men and Women in the 117th American Congress:



Source: Center for American Women and Politics

While there have been momentous strides made, women's political representation in America is still a prevalent issue. In "Women, Gender and Politics," Mona Lena Krook and Sarah Childs explain that changes in women's condition will only come about when women themselves become members of elected political positions. Although women make up the majority of the U.S. voting-age population, registered voters, and actual voters, the same numbers do not correlate with the number of female candidates pursuing political office. Gender equality within the American government not only strengthens democracy but bolsters its' legitimacy, as it can never truly be considered a democracy without the diverse representation of its constituents. Equal representation in American democracy has been a long and hard-fought struggle since the conception of America. The battle for equal representation in democracy can be seen through an

overview of women's suffrage throughout America's history. Although the focus of this thesis is on barriers to representation in political institutions, a brief discussion of the struggle for even the most basic of political rights – the right to vote- reveals some of the challenges women- particularly women of color- face in the political sphere.

WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE THROUGHOUT AMERICAN HISTORY

The struggle for women's political representation has been a longstanding battle since the nation's birth. From the nation's onset, women were aware of the challenges they would face down the line; advocates such as Abigail Adams urged the writers of the Declaration of Independence to include women. "Remember the Ladies," wrote Adams to her husband, John, a delegate to the Continental Congress. "If particular care and attention are not paid to the ladies, we are determined to foment a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice or representation" (Carroll and Fox 2006:45). The pursuit of political office has been a male-dominated field since the nation's conception. It was not until 1848 that the women's suffrage movement began emerging. On July 20, 1848, the country's first women's rights convention in Seneca Falls, New York, marked the official birthday of the women's suffrage movement. The attendees issued a proclamation declaring that men and women were created equally and should be allowed to vote.

When the American Civil War began, it halted official suffrage activity for women. From 1861 to 1865, in regions, North and South women directed their energies to "war work." "The war, however, serves as a "training ground," as women gain important organizational and occupational skills they will later use in post-war organizational activity" (Carroll and Fox 2006:47). In 1866, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony formed an organization dedicated to universal suffrage for white and black women and men called American Equal

Rights Association. Later in 1876, “The Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) is founded by Annie Wittenmyer. With Frances Willard at its head (1876), the WCTU becomes an important force in the struggle for women’s suffrage” (Carroll and Fox 2006:48). These organizations and movements played essential roles in the battle for universal suffrage; each encouraged community members to join and educate constituents on their fundamental rights.

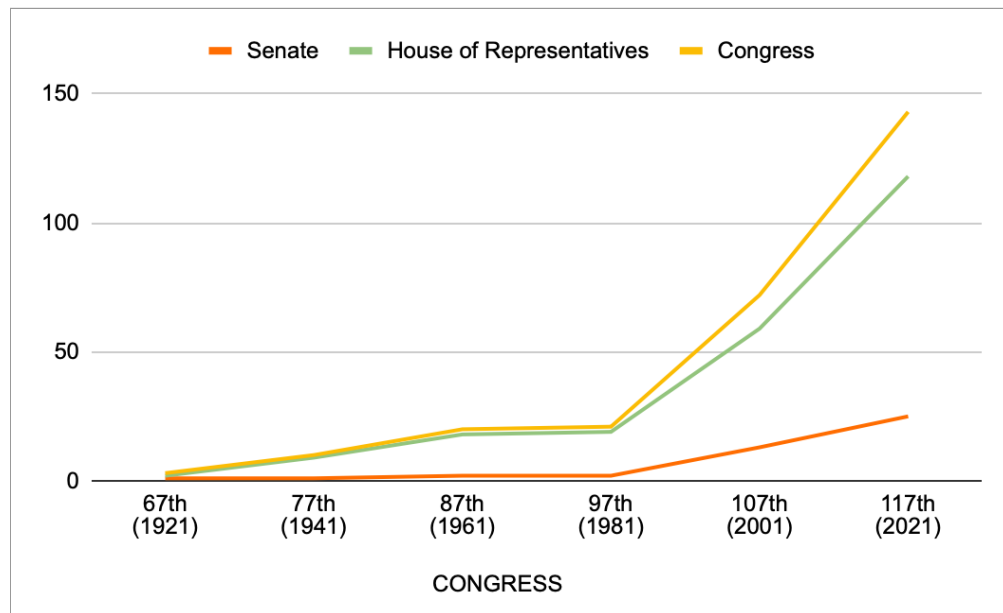
Following the civil war, Susan B. Anthony organized groups and led them in the fight for universal suffrage. Notable progress was made when the Fifteenth Amendment was passed, providing voting rights to African American men in 1890. The Fifteenth Amendment provided political participation to millions of formerly enslaved and politically excluded people, a substantial milestone for suffrage in American history. In 1890, “Conservative and liberal women’s groups alike, including the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, the Young Women’s Christian Association, and the National Association of Colored Women, began to see that voting was the only way for women to affect public policy” (Carroll and Fox 2006:46).

Finally, on June 4, 1919, the United States Congress formally proposed the Nineteenth Amendment to the states for ratification, guaranteeing all American women the right to vote. While the constitution officially held no physical or legal barrier to the right to vote based on sex, the fight for political equality was long from over. Women of color’s participation in politics were still decades away from practice, and voter suppression and racial discrimination continued limiting people of color’s ability to vote. “African Americans, both men, and women were disenfranchised through literacy tests, poll taxes, grandfather clauses, and all-white primaries. It was not until the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 that African American women secured the right to freely practice the franchise” (Fox and Carroll 2006:119).

Thus from the nation's inception till about 1965, with brief periods of exception, even the right to vote was an important site of struggle for women and people of color. Exclusion in representative democracy has catastrophic consequences. As representatives, their primary responsibility is to act "on the basis of what they themselves have concluded is the right policy for their constituents and the nation" (Mansbridge 1999:644). Without a diverse representation of political representatives, it undermines the legitimacy of democracy and undermines constituents' faith in democratic processes. "Representatives fulfill this mandate by crafting and voting on legislation that is line with the needs of the people they serve" (Monk 2019:6). Constituents feel a greater sense of security and legitimacy when they see those with similar backgrounds representing them in politics. There is also a strong link between suffrage and women's representation in political institutions.

In "Advancing Women's Political Power in the Next Century," Kelly Dittmar explains that excluding women from the vote forestalled their opportunities for candidacy and office-holding, even after suffrage was attained. Women still face barriers to electing their own to political office. "Well into the 1970s, one of the most common ways for a woman to enter Congress was by succeeding her deceased husband or father, either by election or appointment" (Blazina and Desliver 2021). Even after women obtained the right to vote, the primary historical method for women to enter Congress was replacing a deceased husband, otherwise known as "the widow effect." "The more senior a House member is before he dies, the more likely the widow is to serve in his place" (Solowiej and Brunell 2003:283). Even today, although women outnumber and outvote men on the ballot, they are still underrepresented as candidates when pursuing political office. The graph below depicts women in the United States Congress overtime and reveals that even today, women only occupy a smaller number of seats in Congress.

Figure 2. Women in American Congress Overtime:



Source: The Brookings Institute

Fighting for women of color's right to political representation has been an ongoing battle since the ratification of the 19th amendment. In one of her speeches, the first woman elected to congress in 1968, Shirley Anita St. Hill Chisholm, echoed, "When I die, I want to be remembered as a woman who lived in the twentieth century and who dared to be a catalyst of change. I don't want to be remembered as the first black woman who went to Congress. And I don't even want to be remembered as the first woman who happened to be black to make a bid for the Presidency. I want to be remembered as a woman who fought for change in the twentieth century. That's what I want" (Gutgold 2017:73).

It was only in the 1990s that the trend shifted to include female candidates in Congress. The "Year of the Women," often referred to as the 1992 elections, marked a historic increase in women in the House of Representatives and the Senate. It held a promise for gender parity in our

Note: The date reflects the composition of Congress on the first day of the session and only includes representatives that were sworn in as members and served more than one day. The 117th Congress includes Jon Ossoff and Raphael Warnock, who were both elected on January 5, 2021, and Kamala Harris, who resigned from office on January 18th, 2021 (The Brookings Institute).

political institutions and served as a beacon of hope for equal political representation in American democracy. The 2018 elections yielded the highest numbers ever for the number of female candidates running for political office. According to the Center for American Women and Politics, more women were running for the United States House of Representatives and Senate in 2018 than ever before. “The 2018 election broke nearly all records in women’s major-party candidacies for the U.S. House and Senate. That year, 476 women ran for the U.S. House, up from the previous high of 299 (+59.2%). In 2020, 583 women are candidates for the U.S. House, a 22.5% increase from the record set two years ago” (Dittmar 2020).

Along with these record-breaking numbers of female candidates, record numbers of female voters superseded any previous records of voter turnouts. An unprecedented number of women ran, and women were elected to more seats in Congress than ever in American history. Over one hundred women were elected to political office, including over 40 women of color (Young Women's Christian Association 2018). Individual candidates also achieved historic firsts, “Democrats Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib became the first Muslim women elected to Congress. Republican Marsha Blackburn became Tennessee’s first female Senator. Republican Kristi Noem became South Dakota’s first female governor” (Cooney 2018). Jasneet Hora, in “Shattering The highest and Hardest Glass Ceiling, Once and For All: How the 2020 Election Can Change Governance in the U.S and Beyond,” explained that “a win by any of these leaders would bring the nation one step closer to its promise of representative democracy and would have tremendous implications for representation and governance in both the American political process and around the world” (Hora 2019).

FEMALE CANDIDATES RECENT RISE IN AMERICAN POLITICS

While there is no single explanation for the increase in female candidates for the 2018 elections, a few prevalent ones emerge. The first and more obvious one was a backlash to Trump's presidency. "I think Trump's victory proved to women — if you did not support him — you could draw two conclusions. One: Women were only meant to go so far, and men like that were meant to win in America, or we were playing by an outdated set of rules that women politicians and women in business followed for decades" (Nilsen 2018). This is undoubtedly exhibited by the comparison of Democratic and Republican women candidates. "Nearly three-quarters of potential female congressional and gubernatorial candidates this year are Democrats" (Caygle 2018).

In 2018, The Pew Research Center conducted a survey and asked constituents why they believe more women are running for U.S Congress than ever before. "One-in-five adults give responses that suggest it's time for a change because the people who have been in charge, particularly men, haven't done a good job; "16% attribute it to long-term societal changes that have led to more opportunities for women in general. Fewer point to President Donald Trump (9%), the #MeToo movement and increased reports of sexual harassment (4%) or Hillary Clinton (3%)" (Igielnik and Horowitz 2018). Yet, these explanations suggested that the gender divide remained an important issue of concern.

Women in the conversation, candidates, consultants, pollsters, researchers, and lawmakers also attribute this rise in female candidates to an increasing and widespread frustration of female constituents and candidates. Jennifer Duffy, a Cook Political Report with over 30 years of experience studying female candidates for the Senate and governor, explains that "I think it's frustrating that some of the biggest issues in our country, and some of the issues that are very

important to women, are not being solved” (Caygle 2018). It has come to the attention of female constituents that changes in legislation and policies they want will not come about without a representative voice of a similar background. “I think women now are saying, ‘Yes, I can do this job as well as a man, but I don’t want to. I want to do it the way I want to do it” (Nilsen 2018). The frustration with the current political climate and lack of representation in Congress fuels the increasing number of female candidates running for political office. “That’s reflected in the numbers of candidates. I think it’s going to result in more empowerment for women and a democracy and government that’s more representative of the people it governs” (Nilsen 2018).

The increase in the number of women in Congress was also a result of Emily’s List. Emily’s List is a Super PAC that recruits the strongest candidates and helps support potentially victorious campaigns through studying the electorate and turning out the vote. They seek to put strong women who run for office at all levels across the country in office. Emily’s List selects candidates that can “make significant contributions to education, health care, voting rights, and economic equality” (Emily’s List). In 2018, they released numbers that showed 34,000 women interested in running for political office reached out to the organization (Nilsen 2018). While not all 34,000 ran, it was a tremendous increase from the 2016 list, which numbered about 920. “Officials at Emily’s List and other women recruitment organizations like Emerge America say many of the women interested in running in 2018 have told them they didn’t think they were qualified to run for office in the past. That changed when they saw Trump get elected” (Nilsen 2018).

In the 2020 election, at least 248 women of color ran for the United States House of Representatives, breaking all previous numbers in American history. Although women have made meaningful strides, they remain underrepresented and underestimated when running for

political office. And these women of color often faced barriers and skepticism, as reflected in the fact that Ayanna Pressley, the first woman of color to win a seat in Congress from Massachusetts in 2018, “ran for her first elective office—city council—over the protestations of political leaders who advised her that she was better suited for an advocacy role” (Sanbonmatsu 2020). Not only have women had to continuously fight for their right to be represented and their right to be elected, but women of color have faced unique disadvantages and barriers.

Throughout this chapter, the essential role women’s representation plays in the legitimacy of American democracy is discussed. America’s democracy can never be truly considered legitimate without women of color’s representation. A brief history of women’s suffrage in American politics is discussed, exemplifying the difficulty women have had since the establishment of America’s democracy. The chapter concludes with an explanation that accounts for the increased number of female candidates in recent American elections. Overall this chapter depicts that women have fought long and hard for representation in American politics, and without their representation, America’s democracy can never be considered legitimate. The work of Danny Hayes and Jennifer Lawless, Kira Sanbonmatsu, and Cathy Cohen are discussed in the next chapter. It works to depict that mainstream political science literature does not account for the barriers and biases women of color face and exemplifies the crucial need for an intersectional approach to fully understand the barriers and biases women of color face in American politics.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

“If we are ever going to make a change on any of our issues—reproductive freedom, health, violence, workplace reform—we’ve got to change the faces [of Congress] . . . if there was any object lesson out of [the] Clarence Thomas–Anita Hill [hearings], it was that we cannot rely on anybody else to represent us. We have to be there to represent ourselves. And it’s got to be now.”

—*Patricia Ireland, Former President of the National Organization for Women*
(McDonagh 2009:93).

This literature review analyzes the divide in political science literature on whether women face systematic bias and barriers when running for elective office in contemporary society in the United States. While Hayes and Lawless assert that women do not face systematic barriers when running for political office in America, intersectionality scholars disagree. Sanbonmatsu and Cohen argue that women are far from parity in American politics, and women of color face additional barriers and biases not conventionally taken into account by political science literature. Hayes and Lawless fail to account for the experiences of women of color in their analysis and exemplify the need for the intersectional approach Sanbonmatsu and Cohen advocate for. This selection also includes an analysis of the absence of literature that adequately captures the battles and biases women of color face in mainstream political science. The literature discusses the challenges women of color face at the intersectionality of race and gender in the current

polarized political atmosphere. It also consists of a summation of the benefits of women of color in politics and the unique contributions their intersectionality adds to the political sphere.

WOMEN ON THE RUN: CHALLENGING THE WIDESPREAD BELIEF

Danny Hayes and Jennifer Lawless, in “Women on the Run: Gender, Media and Political Campaigns in a Polarized Era,” perform an in-depth analysis of the 2010 and 2014 congressional elections and find that contrary to conventional belief, male and female candidates perform equally as well on election day and face very similar electoral landscapes throughout their campaigns. The authors argue that women do not face systematic differences in campaign rhetoric, media coverage, content, and voter impressions. Hayes and Lawless synthesize three aspects of the campaign process: candidate communication, media coverage, and voter impressions. They apply this argument to how candidates communicate, how they utilize T.V. advertisements and Twitter, how reporters cover them through an analysis of local newspapers, and how voters evaluate candidates through two national surveys. They used traditional newspapers, Twitter posts, two national-level surveys, and conducted multiple interviews of campaign managers of recent House races to arrive at their conclusion. Hayes and Lawless’ results show that systematic bias for women, at best, appears to be limited. However, they fail to analyze the experience of female candidates when they serve in office and fail to capture the experiences of women of color in American politics.

Danny Hayes and Jennifer Lawless clarify that there is presumably sexism on the campaign trail and systematic bias in recruitment; however, they only focus on U.S. elections for the House (Hayes and Lawless 2016). They focus their work on the idea that misperceptions of bias in political campaigns serve as barriers to entry. They describe women’s representation in

politics as a “major paradox.” From one side of the spectrum, numerical women are underrepresented at all levels of political office, with only incremental increases in the number of women in office from election to election. From the other side of the spectrum, when women run for political office, they perform just as well as men. Hayes and Lawless clarify that women in contemporary politics have no systematic bias between genders, and the “almost masochistic experience” is no longer common (Hayes and Lawless 2016).

Hayes and Lawless find that “in federal and state races, they raise just as much money, garner just as many votes, and are just as likely to win. This is true not only in general elections but also in congressional primaries” (Hayes and Lawless 2016:6). They use this as the basis to contradict claims that women are underrepresented in America. Moreover, instead conclude that the lack of representation of female candidates is “primarily because they are less likely than men to run for political office in the first place, not that they don’t win when they do” (Hayes and Lawless 2016:6). They find that when a woman is on the ballot, the partisan divide instead of gender is the most salient component of an election. Hayes and Lawless explain that party polarization is the defining feature of politics, not gender, which translates to any discrepancy in campaign messages, media coverage, and voter impressions (Hayes and Lawless 2016). To demonstrate their theories, Hayes and Lawless implement various data sources to synthesize how candidates communicate, analyze T.V. advertisements and Twitter, how reporters cover campaigns through an analysis of local newspapers, and how voters evaluate candidates through two national surveys.

Exploring campaign messages, Hayes and Lawless bring together comprehensive data from television advertising and social media from the 2010 and 2014 midterm elections cycles. They perform an analysis of campaign communications on T.V. advertisements and Twitter

feeds. Hayes and Lawless hypothesized that sex plays a minor role in shaping candidate communication and found that the content of current campaigns and agendas are not related to the gender of the candidate or their opponent (Hayes and Lawless 2016). Hayes and Lawless depict an illustrative description of partisan-dominated campaign processes, with the differences in campaign messages significantly tied to party I.D., not gender. They assert that even in the campaigns with the most emphasis on “women’s issues,” variances in candidate communication are practically undetectable (Hayes and Lawless 2016).

Shifting their focus to the role of media, they focus on “what local newspaper coverage of these campaigns looks like, whether it reflects candidates’ messages and whether the media cover men and women differently” (Hayes and Lawless 2016:58). They scan numerous local newspapers and articles for references of sex or gender along with related issues. Hayes and Lawless address three potential gendered communications: discussion of candidates regarding gendered roles, trait assignments, and associated topics. “Journalists’ tendency to reflect candidates’ campaign messages (and disputes with their opponents), electoral competitiveness, and incumbency shape political reporting and affect the amount of attention devoted to gender, traits, and issues. In almost all cases, candidate sex does not” (Hayes and Lawless 2016:90). Through an analysis of the three gendered communications, they conclude that newsworthiness, as opposed to the gender of the candidates, drives media coverage. Specifically, “partisan conflicts and competitiveness, largely determine election coverage,” and sex has little to no influence on the media attention candidates receive (Hayes and Lawless 2016:58).

Hayes and Lawless then turn to national survey data and utilize 2010 and 2014 CCES (Cooperative Congressional Election Study) survey results specifically designed to examine if and how the gender of a specific candidate influences voters’ attitudes and behaviors. They

conducted numerous interviews with previous campaign managers and applied two national surveys to evaluate if candidate gender significantly influenced voter impressions. They find that “voters are just as unlikely as journalists to assess candidates in traditionally gendered terms. Instead, partisanship-long identified as a central force in congressional elections- shapes voters’ overall impressions of candidates, as well as evaluations of their personal attributes and issue handling abilities” (Hayes and Lawless 2016:110). Conversely, Hayes and Lawless found that in the rare case when there are differential assessments of male and female candidates offered by voters, women are consistently advantaged. They find that GOP women rate female candidates lower on issues concerning the economy, and Democratic women rate women higher on trustworthiness, empathy, and competence (Hayes and Lawless 2016).

Hayes and Lawless rely on various empirical data sets to bridge the gap between perception and reality and conclude that female candidates fare as well as their male counterparts in recent American elections. They attribute the gap in female candidates’ and male candidates’ success rates to polarized politics and the declining number of female candidates. Hayes and Lawless assert that women win elections at the same rate as men, and the notion that they achieve these victories despite “inhospitable campaign trials” is incorrect. Significant differences in gender stereotypes accounted for only 4.2% of their model runs (Hayes and Lawless 2016). They attribute the lack of female candidates to three misconceptions of bias.

The first misperception of bias, social identity, and perception has been a natural explanation for political attitudes, gender, race, and religion can explain people’s perceptions of bias against women in political campaigns. Hayes and Lawless combat this misconception by explaining that “Because women in the electorate share a gender identity with a minority group-in this case, female politicians- that group memberships might make bias against the group

particularly salient” (Hayes and Lawless 2016:117). They also add that we currently live in a polarized era in which partisanship has become a social identity, and democrats, as opposed to republicans, are more likely to perceive bias. Hayes and Lawless attribute the second misperception of bias to the national discussion of gender. They explain that the national news coverage’s framing of women in politics as facing sexism and overrepresented instances of sexism influence misconceptions of bias. Conversely, Hayes and Lawless argue that this behavior gets so much attention in the media and politics because it is an unusual feat. Lastly, workplace and personal experience extrapolated to the political context is the last reason Hayes and Lawless give as to why misperceptions of bias persist despite the evidence to support it. They explain that “People who experience or see examples of workplace and broader social discrimination against women may assume that women face similar barriers when they run for office” (Hayes and Lawless 2016:124).

Hayes and Lawless argue in favor of the expected success of current and future generations of female candidates and explain that women in political office bring a greater sense of political legitimacy to the government. “Women who replace men in the same district are more likely to focus on “women’s “issues, such as childcare, reproductive rights, pay equity, and poverty.... As the percentage of female legislators increases, so do female citizens’ sense that government is responsive” (Hayes and Lawless 2016:10). Hayes and Lawless state that without women running for political office in the United States, the legitimacy of public policy and democracy is threatened. They express their optimism for the success of female candidates in the political realm noting the significant symbolic outcomes.

Therefore, Danny Hayes and Jennifer Lawless conclude that, contrary to popular belief, women do not face systematic differences in campaign rhetoric, media coverage, content, and

voter impressions. Instead, it is the misconception about the presence of barriers in American politics that actually serve as barriers of entry for women. They assert that media and voter bias are rarely present in most elections, and when inconsequentially present, they do little to keep women out of office. Hayes and Lawless explain that misconceptions about the prevalence of bias women face in American politics are what actually serve as barriers to entry. They further assert that the key to increasing women's representation in American politics lies in ensuring that all constituents know that women who run for political office will not face unique sets of additional barriers.

The flaw in their research emerges most clearly in their conclusion. "And while challenges for women remain - particularly in the candidate emergence process - there are fewer barriers to political success today than ever before" (Hayes and Lawless 2016:136). Hayes and Lawless assert throughout their work that there are no longer systematic barriers against women in the political realm. However, they state that challenges for women remain in the candidate emergence process but fail to analyze the candidate emergence process in-depth. Women's challenges in the emergence process are where they face the most scrutiny, bias, and barriers as new and unfamiliar voices in politics. The scrutiny, bias, and barriers they face only multiply throughout their political campaigns and when they take office. However, Hayes and Lawless fail to analyze the experience of female candidates during their time in political office.

Hayes and Lawless do not identify what does and does not count as barriers against women, leaving the definition to a subjective understanding and criteria. Furthermore, while Hayes and Lawless are correct that there "are fewer barriers to political success today than ever before," that does not equate to an equal and fair campaign for female and male candidates regardless of gender. Equal and fair campaigns free of bias and barriers are needed. More

importantly, Hayes and Lawless do not mention women of color throughout their work or touch upon the conversation or race. They generalize the entire book to cover all women in political elections but fail to account for the different barriers and biases women of color in specific. The intersectionality of race and gender is a crucial explanation for numerous barriers and biases women of color face in American elections. While Hayes and Lawless' work make compelling arguments, without systemic barrier and bias evaluated for women of color in politics, it is impossible to claim that the sex of a candidate no longer influences modern campaigns. With the growing number of women of color in politics, the intersectionality of race and gender needs to be considered when forming any conclusions or generalizations about women in politics.

AN INTERSECTIONAL ANALYSIS: WOMEN'S UNDERREPRESENTATION

In "Women's Underrepresentation in the U.S. Congress," Kira Sanbonmatsu points out that women's election to office-holding positions is at an all-time high. However, as opposed to Hayes and Lawless, Sanbonmatsu argues that women are far from parity. She explains that "Gender—as a feature of both society and politics—has always worked alongside race to determine which groups possess the formal and informal resources and opportunities critical for winning elective office" (Sanbonmatsu 2020). Women's access to political office is constantly everchanging based on changes in social roles, law, policy, and the strategies of political parties, organizations, and social movement actors. Sanbonmatsu also notes that women's situations as candidates increasingly depend on party due to heightened partisan polarization.

Kimberlé Crenshaw originally coined the term intersectionality to shed light on the way people's social identities can overlap. "It's basically a lens, a prism, for seeing the way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other. We tend to talk about race inequality as separate from inequality based on gender, class, sexuality or immigrant

status. What's often missing is how some people are subject to all of these, and the experience is not just the sum of its parts "(Steinmetz 2020). Similarly, when evaluating literature and scholarship on people of color, an intersectional lens is essential to accurately account for people of color's complete experiences. Ange-Marie Hancock explains that intersectionality invites people to think of gender and race in a combination instead of "pure identities."

"Intersectionality's intellectual project is thus twofold: an analytical approach to understanding between-category relationships and a project to render visible and remediable previously invisible, unaddressed material effects of the sociopolitical location of Black women or women of color" (Hancock 2016:22).

Sanbonmatsu discusses the puzzling paradox of the underrepresentation of women in politics. Women in America have voted at a higher rate than men for over four decades yet have remained underrepresented in office-holding positions. There is also an apparent variation in women's office holding positions subnationally. Women in 2019 held a majority of seats in the Nevada Legislature, and Nancy Pelosi has presided as speaker of the U.S House of Representatives for over seven years. However, women are far from parity in the United States political sphere. The ideals of American democracy imply a missing connection between representatives mirroring their constituents' demographics and the representation of women. "While scholars may assume that social and economic equality will give rise to political equality, the reverse may be true: women's political equality may be needed in order to achieve equality in other domains" (Sanbonmatsu 2020).

Kira Sanbonmatsu explains that "the challenges American women face in politics are partly structural" (Sanbonmatsu 2020). Because of its single-member congressional districts, America lags behind other nations regarding women's representation. Single-member districts

are represented by a single office holder as opposed to multi-member districts, which are represented by multiple officeholders. Multi-member districts can have a positive effect on women's representation. Still, single-member districts, also known as winner-takes-all elections, amplify the lack of representation by party and race. In addition, half the countries around the world use quotas in elections for parliament, but the United States constitution "lacks a statute or constitutional provision for a gender quota for candidates or officeholders" (Sanbonmatsu 2020). Incumbents have disproportionately been male and have remained so because of America's two-party system and lack of term limits. Accordingly, women conventionally enter Congress only after winning open-seat contests because of the lack of opportunities for new candidates. Sanbonmatsu notes that formal legal barriers have not been the only barrier for women. Political and social factors play an essential role in shaping women's presence in American politics. Women's opportunities to participate in and influence politics centrally depend on race, ethnicity and gendered expectations.

From their earliest years, girls and boys internalize society's expectations of conventional gender roles. Disproportionate responsibilities at home have only further enforced the assumption that women are less qualified for politics and altered their opportunities for political involvement. "Political institutions from political party organizations to political campaigns, as well as actors such as voters and donors, may be biased against women or withhold support as a result of societal expectations about women's roles and their abilities" (Sanbonmatsu 2020). The language in campaigns and elections plays a significant role in reinforcing the notion that politics is a male-dominated field. "Public opinion polls from the twentieth-century document widespread sexism, issue stereotypes, trait stereotypes, and general skepticism about the appropriateness of women wielding political power" (Sanbonmatsu 2020).

Sanbonmatsu explains that, especially for candidates of color, racially polarized voting, stereotypes, and gatekeeper skepticism have further reduced their opportunities. “But also, other barriers related to men’s greater access to and accumulation of informal social, educational, and economic credentials. Gender roles in society, the sexual division of labor, and racial and ethnic in-equalities have combined to advantage White men in politics” (Sanbonmatsu 2020). Many of the barriers women of color face are primarily structural and challenging to overcome.

“Socioeconomic stratification intertwined with race means that women of color candidates, and potential candidates, lack equal access to resources” (Sanbonmatsu 2020). Minority candidates face additional barriers during the informal recruitment and selection process. “Prejudice and stereotypes based on race, gender, and/or their intersection mean that White women, Black women, Asian American women, Latinas, and Native American women are likely to have different experiences on the campaign trail” (Sanbonmatsu 2020).

Without financial and informal support, it is difficult for women of color to progress outside majority-minority districts. The financing of politics poses a significant disadvantage for women, and gendered giving patterns further exacerbate this economic disadvantage. “The financial cost of running for Congress is high and rising. All else equal, this aspect of American politics places women, as well as men of color, at a disadvantage because of the effects of gender and race on employment opportunities, personal income, and wealth” (Sanbonmatsu 2020). The Gender and Multi-Cultural Leadership National Survey studied a group of elected officials, and a sizable number of women of color reported that they experienced race-based discrimination. “Women of color serving in state legislatures report having to overcome more efforts to discourage their candidacies than their White women colleagues” (Sanbonmatsu 2020). This

discrimination, in turn, affected their party support and fundraising and resulted in unequal treatment in assessments of their qualifications.

Because women fare as well as men in general election contests and primary contests, scholars such as Lawless and Hayes tend to conclude that the main problem is the scarcity of women candidates. However, Sanbonmatsu contends that women face more competition than men when running for political office; they must appear not only suitable for the position but even perfect to be considered. Women of color “may need to be more qualified to obtain the same vote share” (Sanbonmatsu 2020). She believes that the absence of impediments for women is insufficient; there is an essential need for support and recruitment mechanisms to drive women’s representation.

The representation of women in Congress has been a topic of discussion since the creation of America’s constitution. However, scholarly attention is primarily focused on social dynamics rather than political dynamics, with little attention paid to the political dynamics of women’s election to office. “But political actors including parties and interest groups shape candidate recruitment, campaigns, and ultimately election results, with gendered and race implications” (Sanbonmatsu 2020). Women of color have attained historic firsts within the last few years. While this signals progress, “the fact that they occurred only recently is a poor reflection on the country’s record of inclusion (Sanbonmatsu 2020). Sanbonmatsu discusses that “Accounts of minority or female office-holding that fail to adopt an intersectional lens are likely to be partial or incorrect” (Sanbonmatsu 2020). Sanbonmatsu ends her work, reinforcing the need for an intersectional approach for future research on women’s election to Congress. Such an intersectional approach in the next chapter helps evaluate Ocasio-Cortez’s political career through the lens of gender and race. Women are a large and distinguished group, and

conventional research methods only focusing on gender are insufficient. Political equality as a whole must be taken into account to understand inequalities beyond gender alone.

WOMEN OF COLOR: PORTRAYING THE CONTINUING MARGINALITY

Cathy Cohen, in “A Portrait of Continuing Marginality: The Study of Women of Color in American Politics,” elaborates on why existing research on women in politics cannot be directly applied to women of color and the vital role this research plays in understanding women of color in American politics. Similar to Sanbonmatsu, she argues that women of color are, for the most part, invisible and therefore experience a continuing marginality in research of American politics. Direct attention must be paid to account for women of color’s unique experiences and opportunities for women of color to understand the political activity of women of color. Cohen urges future researchers to broaden the definition of “political” and continue to create a basic knowledge of the political participation of women of color. She establishes that it is necessary “to push for the complete and complex presentation of the barriers and opportunities different women of color encounter.” Throughout her work, she puts forth four significant causes for the continuous pattern of neglect of the political behavior of women of color and five general points to consider when creating a research agenda for women of color in American politics.

Cohen notes that the first reason for the neglect of women of color in politics can be traced back to Hopkins and Pateman’s argument. They argue that women of color center their political activity on social forms of political representation, and a national focus on electoral forms of participation diverts attention away from women of color’s political activity (Carroll 2003). “Such activities, which many researchers have designated the private actions of individual women, have proven over the years to facilitate a collective political consciousness on the part of women of color that leads to increased electoral behavior and mobilization in communities of

color” (Carroll 2003:2). American politics have a very narrow definition of what is considered “noteworthy political participation,” and this often does not include the “nontraditional political activity of women of color” such as organizing through churches, schools, and other organizations (Cohen 2003). Without a broader and in-depth understanding of what counts as “political,” the political work and participation of women can never be fully acknowledged and understood.

Cathy Cohen turns her attention to the second reason for the absence of information on the political participation of women of color in American politics, “the increasing reliance on survey data as the evidence of choice in political science” (Cohen 2003:2). For information on the political behavior of Americans, most researchers turn to national public opinion surveys and national databases. However, these national public opinion surveys and national databases do not accurately represent the voices of women of color. “As we know, women of color, especially when pulled out of a national study and then disaggregated by racial group, rarely comprise a sub-sample large enough to examine rigorously” (Cohen 2003:2). Even when attention is paid to oversampling, this also produces a skewed representation of women of color and does not accurately represent the community. Cohen also notes that even in the rare instances where data on women of color has been properly collected, the research questions often focused on specifically white respondents. Thus, “....the questions are unable to tease out the variation and unique political behavior and circumstances of Latina, Asian and Pacific Islander, Native American, and African American women” (Cohen 2003:3).

She attributes the third reason for the invisibility of women of color in American politics to the “limited way in which political science has sought to diversify and expand its curriculum and legitimize fields of research” (Cohen 2003:3). She explains that although there have been

strides in recognizing the diverse fields of women and women of color in American politics, it is not enough. Although political scientists have increasingly begun to view “women and politics as areas worthy of scholarly pursuit and interest, the framework through which we engage in this work has not changed accordingly” (Cohen 2003:3). She provides the example of the inclusion of Black politics as a course within a political science department. The majority of the course is focused on prominent black leaders specifically, and only a tiny portion of the course is allocated to the overarching issues of gender and color. Even in other courses and research focused on women in politics, whiteness is generally assumed as the norm, and women of color are rarely referenced. When referenced, they are only mentioned in an additive manner. “These categories, while suggestive of inclusion, are capable in the wrong hands of enacting their own form of exclusion or secondary marginalization” (Cohen 1999:3).

Cohen attributes the last reason for the pattern of neglect of the study of women of color in American politics to the general demographics of the researchers in the field of political science. Generally, white men overpopulate the number of political scientists, which affects the choices of which populations get studied. It's only human nature that researchers and scholars in political science subconsciously and consciously gravitate their attention to those who act, look, and have similar experiences as their own. “It seems that scholars (at least in American politics) gravitate toward those understood as the norm, those who have been studied in the past (thus there is a literature to build on), and those whose observation is likely to win you the esteem of your colleagues, the attention of publishers, and eventually, tenure from your institution” (Cohen 2003:3). Patterns of replication are expected within any field of research. When considering these patterns, it accounts for the reality that women of color are inadequately researched and represented in American politics.

While many reasons explain the absence of work on the political participation of women of color in American politics, Cohen presents these four prevalent ones. She enforces the reality that the solution to the inclusion of women of color in politics cannot happen without the combination of the work of scholars in various disciplines outside of political science. Cohen explains that the processes of building a field with a concentration of women of color in politics warrant an interdisciplinary project, and it is essential to reject the conventional boundaries and framework of politics set by political science (Cohen 2003). She expands on three general categories of knowledge of established literature on women of color in politics. The first is extra-systemic participation, such as social movements, labor, and grassroots organizing, in which we have the most extensive information about the politics of women of color. The second is traditional political behavior such as electoral activity and public opinion. Lastly, elite leadership activities include elected and appointed public officials (Cohen 2003). While Cohen rightfully asks for the expansion of the realm of the political beyond electoral, this thesis draws upon her framework to emphasize the significance she places on an intersectional framework. Furthermore, as Ocasio-Cortez's case study shows, her success is only possible due to the efforts of all the other forms of political organizing Cohen mentions.

Throughout her work, Cathy Cohen stresses the importance of an intersectional framework and approach to representing women of color in politics accurately. She enforces the notion that a new research agenda on women of color in American politics is not only warranted but necessary and provides five general points to be considered. The first is the need to "disaggregate the category of women of color" (Cohen 2003:14). There are distinct social, political, and cultural experiences that influence an individual's political activity, and any attempt to understand the political activity of women of color requires an individualized outlook on their

unique experiences. "...The varied lived experiences of women of color, as well as the unequal and skewed distribution of the limited knowledge we do have, necessitates that we further break down our categories of analysis" (Cohen 2003:14). However, this can compromise a disaggregation of a separate category for women of color and requires a further separation into distinct racial groups.

A second issue Cohen proposes for a future research agenda is the need to expand on the definition of what is "political." While there have been notable strides in electing women of color into political positions, there is still a long road ahead. Cohen notes the worry that "the local and community-based political activity, daily struggles, and attempts at empowerment undertaken by the masses of women of color will be largely neglected" (Cohen 2003:15). Therefore, a redefinition of what is considered political and politically important is necessary. It is essential to prioritize research that examines "the efforts of women working locally to intervene politically in those institutions and systems perceived as structuring their lives" (Cohen 2003:15). A third issue essential for future research is addressing the questions of the purpose and reason of this research. "The oppression and marginalization experienced by women of color suggest that their empowerment at both the national and local level is required if many in their communities are to survive" (Cohen 2003:15). A redistribution of fundamental power is necessary, and an essential part of the research needs to focus on measuring the levels of inclusion and creating policies and interventions that can improve the lives of women of color.

The fourth principle is the question of how to engage with this work. "I want to push for the complete and complex presentation of the barriers and opportunities different women of color encounter" (Cohen 2003:16). Cohen explains that while this research can often shift to different tangents, the research must be designed so that the process and result lead to the empowerment

of the individuals and communities in the study. “To that end, additive approaches to the study of identities must be abandoned and replaced with intersectional framings developed and utilized by feminist scholars, many of color” (Cohen 2003:16). Lastly, Cohen believes that any future research must similarly resemble past research and continue to develop basic knowledge on the political activity of women of color. She adds that it is essential to expand on “what we know about the worldviews, policy preferences, and general political activity of women of color today” (Cohen 2003:17). Subsequently, a restructuring of survey questions by diversifying the research team and target population would be warranted.

Cathy concludes her work by reinforcing the necessity of an individual review of the experiences and political actions of women of color to build the field of women of color in American politics. “Special” papers, panels, or journal editions delegated to women of color in politics are not enough. “We must expect all those who study women and politics to consistently address the issues confronted by women of color, challenging the unspoken normative standard of whiteness in this field and making central the interaction of gender, race, and ethnicity in our research” (Cohen 2003:19). Cohen urges her peers in American politics to critically reevaluate the role of gender and race within their research and publications and holds publishers and foundations responsible for the lack of representation allocated to women of color in politics. She reinforces the importance of this research, explaining that “We must remember that research on women of color in American politics can serve as an important bridge between academia and activism” (Cohen 2003:19). She urges her peers to seize the opportunity to research the intersectionality of women of color in politics to not only expand the political literature and better the lives of women of color.

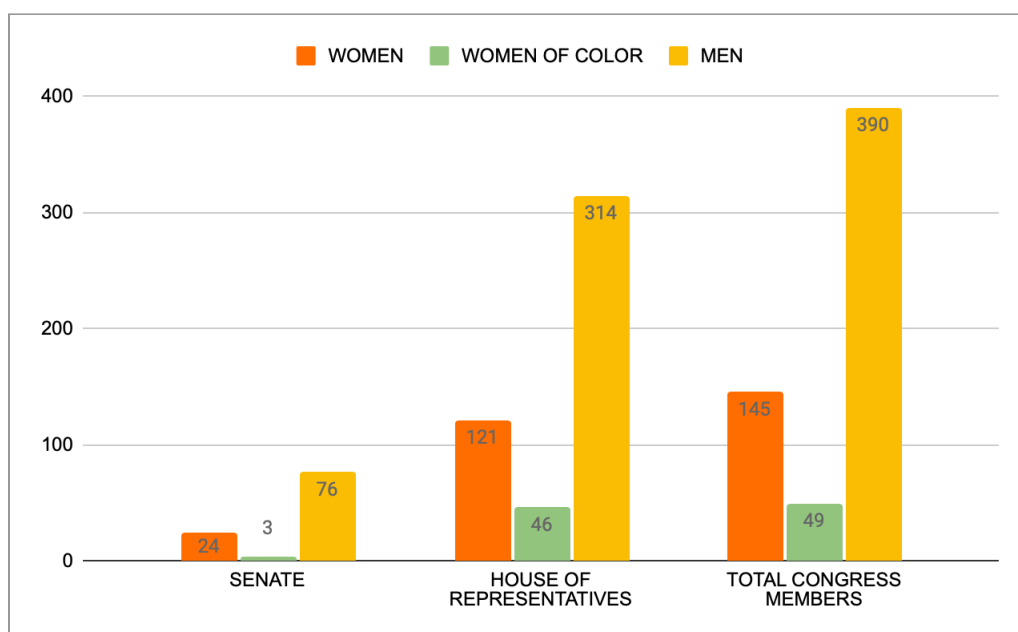
DOUBLE TROUBLE: THE INTERSECTIONALITY OF RACE AND GENDER

The illustrative examples of the three dominant voices in political science literature discussed the role of gender in American politics. One central argument by Danny Hayes and Jennifer Lawless finds that contrary to conventional belief, male and female candidates perform equally as well on election day and face very similar electoral landscapes throughout their campaigns. On the Contrary, Kira Sanbonmatsu asserts that women are far from parity in American politics. Cathy Cohen further explains that existing research on women in politics cannot be directly applied to women of color. The intersectionality of gender and race needs to be considered when evaluating the role of gender in American politics. Hayes and Lawless fail to do so, therefore, their analysis and conclusions are inadequate to capture women's experience and particularly women of color, in politics.

“Intersectionality is a framework that recognizes the interconnectedness of sociopolitical categories that overlap with systems of discrimination or disadvantage” (Brown et al. 2021). Women of color are doubly disadvantaged by the intersection of gender and racial inequalities. Women of color face different barriers and biases because of their gender and racial differences. “The experiences and pathways to office of women of color often differ from those of both male candidates of color and white female candidates” (Sanbonmatsu 2015). Not only are women of color with ambition and aspiration disadvantaged on account of their sex, but they are almost everywhere baffled and mocked because of their race (Branch 2011:8). “Minority women are disadvantaged by their location at the intersections of race, gender, and class inequalities, with implications for all aspects of political participation, including the pursuit of elective office” (Sanbonmatsu 2015). The graph below shows that, parallel to Sanbonmatsu and Cohen's

argument, women of color are significantly underrepresented in today's Congress, only comprising a small portion of congress members.

Figure 3. The Composition of the 117th American Congress:



Source: Center for American Women and Politics and The Brookings Institute

“Research about women of color is expanding and identifying important differences in how women reach office and how they legislate” (Political Parity 2015:1). Research specifically centered on the intersection of gender and race in the running for executive office is essential to accurately capture women of color’s experiences in United States politics. “In The Journal of Applied Psychology, Jennifer L. Berdahl and Celia Moore use the concept of double jeopardy to shed light on women of color’s experiences of racism and misogyny and explain that the compound effect of these experiences is lower-paying, fewer prestigious, and fewer powerful jobs than white men” (Khosroshahi 2021).

Although Hayes and Lawless argue that gender no longer is the dominating base for the unfair treatment of women, intersectionality scholars contest that gender shares the spotlight with

Note: The date reflects the composition of Congress on the first day of the session and only includes representatives were sworn in as members and served more than one day. The 117th Congress includes Jon Ossoff and Raphael Warnock, who were both elected on January 5, 2021, and Kamala Harris, who resigned from office on January 18th, 2021 (The Brookings Institute).

race. Both gender and race combined form a “double jeopardy” and “double trouble” predicament where the intersectionality of both make women of color’s experience of racism and sexism worse. Sanbonmatsu explains that office-holding and gender connections are not fixed. “Women’s access to office has been shaped by changes in law, policy, and social roles, as well as the activities and strategies of social movement actors, political parties, and organizations” (Sanbonmatsu 2020). As Cohen explained, women of color do not utilize traditional forms of political organization and occasionally do not have access to them. When they do mobilize unconventional forms of political organization, these institutions are considered outside the realm of what is acceptable as “political,” furthering the need for a redefinition of what is “political.”

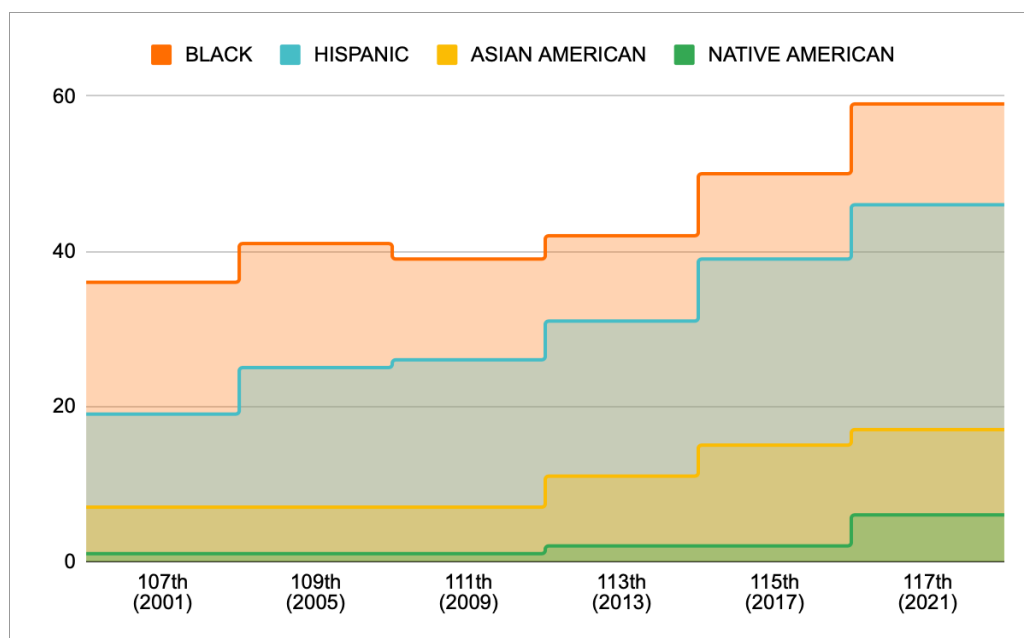
The challenges that women of color face when pursuing elective office are different from those of white women. “The disadvantages that women of color face in the labor force, their higher rate of poverty, and limited or nonexistent assets have consequences for their ability to seek elected office” (Sanbonmatsu 2015). They face funding difficulties, stereotypes, and a lack of peers of similar backgrounds and gender in politics. Women of color face formal and informal barriers in their pursuit of elective office, starting with recruitment and selection. “Without informal support and financial support, it has been challenging for women of color to make inroads outside of majority-minority districts” (Sanbonmatsu 2020). For example, Ayanna Pressley, who became “the first woman of color to win a seat in Congress from Massachusetts, ran for her first elective office—city council—over the protestations of political leaders who advised her that she was better suited for an advocacy role” (Sanbonmatsu 2020).

According to the Center for American Women and Politics, “of the 143 women serving in the 117th U.S. Congress, 49, or 34.3%, are women of color; and women of color constitute 9.2% of the total 535 members of Congress” (Center for American Women and Politics). While

majority-minority districts are attributed to the increase of women of color representatives in those districts, winning statewide office has not been as accessible. “Women of color legislators are more likely to be elected from majority-minority districts. Such districts were drawn in response to racially polarized voting patterns and the desire to allow minority voters to select their candidates of choice” (Political Parity 2015:2).

The graph below depicts the non-white members of Congress over time by race, revealing the different representations of people of color in Congress.

Figure 4. Non-White Members of Congress Overtime:



Source: The Pew Research Center

Kira Sanbonmatsu, in “Why Not a Woman of Color? The Candidacies of U.S. Women of Color for Statewide Executive Office,” illustrates that the campaign experiences in pursuit of elective offices for women of color differ vastly from their male colleagues and white female colleagues. Traditional literature on women’s political involvement “did not account for

Note: The data reflects the composition of Congress as of January 26, 2021. Non-voting delegates and commissioners are not included in the data. Congress members who identify as one or more of the above groups are counted in each respective group. Hispanics are of any race, and Asian Americans include Pacific Islanders (The Pew Research Center).

difference among groups of women failed to account for how ethno-racial, sexual orientation, nativity, disability, or religion may have influenced women's political experiences and political outcomes" (Brown et al. 2021). "For women of color, the "glass ceiling" metaphor doesn't cut it" (Khosroshahi 2021). Instead, the term "concrete ceiling" was created to refer to the barriers to success women of color face. The difference between the two terms is that the concrete ceiling is a term made specifically for women of color (Khosroshahi 2021). Once the literature accounts for the "double disadvantage" of women in pursuit of political office, how different identities are associated with various political outcomes are highlighted.

PRESENCE OF WOMEN OF COLOR IN SHIFTING AGENDAS

Women of color are important in American politics because they bolster the legitimacy of democracy and because their intersectional identities provide them with unique perspectives on politics and allow them to focus on issues pertinent to their minority communities. In "Gender and Elections: Shaping the Future of American Politics," Susan J. Carroll and Richard L. Fox point to the reality that women constitute a majority of the electorate but only a fraction of government representatives. Increasing the number of women of color in politics leads to "bolstering democratic legitimacy, distinct policy differences, and symbolic importance" (Monk 2019:23). Minority representation in all levels of government is essential to ensuring a valid and legitimate democracy. "In its deliberative function, a representative body should ideally include at least one representative who can speak for every group that might provide new information, perspectives, or ongoing insights relevant to the understanding that leads to a decision" (Mansbridge 1999:643). Danny Hayes and Jennifer Lawless agree that "If women do not run for office, at least in part because of a widespread belief that the campaign environment would be

biased against them, then that threatens the legitimacy of both public policy and the larger democratic process” (Hayes and Lawless 2016:11).

The inclusion of more women of color in political positions is likely to lead to significant changes in policy. Studies have proven that women of color’s intersectionality provides them with a unique perspective on politics and improves political representation quality. Women of color are more likely to sponsor bills and legislation that correlates to women’s interests and minority interests. In a study by Edith J. Barrett, “African American women legislators coalesced around a common agenda of education, health care, and economic development—an agenda that differed somewhat from that of their African American male and white female colleagues” (Political Parity 2015:4).

For example, in 2004, Gwen Moore was elected from the 4th Congressional District, becoming the first African American woman and the first African American elected to Congress from Wisconsin (Carroll and Fox 2006). Her political career focused mainly on promoting women’s issues and poverty issues. She is most notably known for creating legislation to extend Medicaid coverage to women diagnosed with cervical and breast cancers. Women of color in political office create diverse leadership and provide inclusion in the policymaking process. From the first female vice president, Kamala Harris’s words, “you have to see and smell and feel the circumstances of people to really understand them” (Charisma 2020).

Women and men support different legislation and have different policy priorities. “Studies of members of the U.S. House of Representatives, for example, have found that women are more likely than men to support policies favoring gender equity, day care programs, flex time in the workplace, legal and accessible abortion, minimum wage increases, and the extension of the food

stamp program” (Carroll and Fox 2006:5). They have also been found to prioritize legislation centered on women’s rights, education, health care, and the welfare of families. When underrepresented in United States political offices, their intersectional and distinct perspectives are also underrepresented. In addition, Sanbonmatsu adds that “the determinants of state legislative officeholding for women of color differ from those for white women or minority men. And there is some evidence that minority women are more ambitious than majority women” (Sanbonmatsu 2015:3).

“Women of color, with their distinct histories, experiences, and collective power, are not monolithic. They have distinct interracial and interracial perspectives that lawmakers must recognize and respect” (Solomon and Maxwell 2019). Women of color’s contributions to society are essential in providing an inclusive outlook on policy and legislation. “When there is a significant under-representation of women at the point of final decision, this can and does have serious consequences, and it is partly in reflection on this that many have shifted attention from the details of policy commitments to the composition of the decision-making group” (Krook and Childs 2010:189).

Danny Hayes and Jennifer Lawless also explain that constituents’ political attitudes and engagement can be positively affected by the presence of women in politics. “Women who live in districts with female congressional candidates, for instance, have been shown to be more willing to discuss politics” (Hayes and Lawless 2016:10). When the number of women in government increases, female constituents sense that the government’s response increases. “In a cross-national study, the presence of highly visible female politicians correlated with adolescent girls’ expectations of political engagement” (Hayes and Lawless 2016:10). Moreover, when

women win office in locations where female representation is low, more female candidates run in future elections (Hayes and Lawless 2016).

Cathy Cohen furthers the conversation by analyzing the specific benefits women of color contribute to American politics. “Overwhelmingly, Black women participate in more types of activities and participate more frequently than their Black male counterparts” (Alex-Assensoh and Stanford 1997:408). Through a closer look at the history of Latina elected officials in California, Cruz Takash “found that many of the elected officials she interviewed made their way into these offices by first engaging in local community political work” (Cohen 2003:12). In addition, the Latina officials interviewed prioritized issues of employment and education that directly affected the Latino community. “African American women’s greater support than that found among white women for both the ERA and legalized abortion, when religiosity is controlled for” (Cohen 2003:10). The routes women of color take to political office play a significant role in their political agenda when elected to office. “Research on Black women, for instance, has emphasized the role of the Black church, the Civil Rights movement, and the Black Power movement in shaping the consciousness and political agenda of Black women officeholders” (Cohen 2003:12).

Women of color incorporate an intersectional take on policy and legislation and symbolize empowerment and inclusivity for their peers. Their presence in politics helps to empower other women and encourage future leaders of color. “Women in public office stand as symbols for other women, both enhancing their identification with the system and their ability to influence within it. This subjective sense of being involved and heard for women, in general, alone makes the election of women to public office important” (Carroll and Fox 2006:6). Women

of color's presence in the political arena are crucial to encourage participation and improve the quality and diversity of political representation in future political elections.

Recent literature in political science has been divided on whether or not there are systemic barriers for women in contemporary American politics, even though both agree on their importance in politics. Throughout this literature review, the work of Danny Hayes, Jennifer Lawless, Kira Sanbonmatsu, and Cathy Cohen was explored. Danny Hayes and Jennifer Lawless perform an in-depth analysis and conclude that there are no longer systemic barriers and biases for women in American politics; the authors fail to account for the intersectionality of gender and race. Without analyzing the barriers and biases women of color face in American politics, it is impossible to establish that there are no systematic barriers and biases against women. Kira Sanbonmatsu explains that the campaign experiences in pursuit of political office in America differ vastly for women of color. Women of color face additional challenges and barriers at the intersectionality of race and gender. Cathy Cohen echoes this sentiment and argues that women of color are still largely invisible and underrepresented in American politics. She strongly urges for an intersectional approach when studying women of color in politics and explains that existing research on women cannot be applied to women of color.

The campaign and election of political leader Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez are explored in the following chapter. An in-depth analysis is conducted to examine the intersectionality of race and gender throughout her political career. The role her identity plays and her contributions to American politics are also analyzed. Ocasio-Cortez's political career exemplifies that, as opposed to Hayes and Lawless' conclusion, women of color do not face the same political reality as their male counterparts. Their analysis is inadequate to capture the experience of women and particularly women of color, in politics. Although Hayes and Lawless argue that women are

equally likely to be elected, they state that they face barriers in the candidate emergence process and fail to account for their experiences once elected to office. As Sanbonmatsu and Cohen argue, Ocasio-Cortez's campaign trail and post-election atmosphere are categorized by racial and gendered stereotypes and attacks, modeling the reality that women of color in American politics are far from parity. While party differences were a topic of discussion in the attacks she faced, they were manifested through stereotypical racist and sexist language and terms.

This chapter will help shed light on the bias and barriers women of color still face in the campaign process and post-election, emphasizing the need for an intersectional approach to understanding women of color in politics. Women's political equality is crucial in order to achieve equality in other domains. An intersectional approach when analyzing Ocasio-Cortez's political career reveals that mainstream political science literature does not adequately account for the barriers and biases women of color face at the intersectionality of race and gender. An intersectional approach is essential to fully understand the complexity of the barriers and biases women of color face in American politics. Without it, the challenges women of color face can never be remedied.

CHAPTER 3: ALEXANDRIA OCASIO-CORTEZ

“We need to realize that our democracy does belong to us, and that if we don’t participate in it, we don’t invest in it, we don’t put our own energy into it, what we’re doing is we’re giving it away to somebody else.

We give it away to a very small group of people.”

— Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez

(Hillstrom 2020:71).

This thesis seeks to answer the question of whether or not mainstream political science literature adequately captures the barriers and biases women of color face at the intersectionality of race and gender when running for political office in America. Throughout the literature review, Hayes and Lawless’ argued that contrary to popular belief, women do not face systematic barriers when running for political office in America. Conversely, Sanbonmatsu argued that women are far from parity, and gender has always worked with race to determine which candidates have access to the formal and informal resources and opportunities necessary to win political office. Cohen echoed Sanbonmatsu’s argument emphasizing that women of color experience continuing marginality in American politics, and reinforced the need for an intersectional approach when studying the political behavior of women.

This chapter evaluates the intertwined role gender and race play in the attacks against Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez during her campaign and after her election to Congress. This chapter depicts that contrary to Hayes and Lawless’ argument, women of color face campaign trails and post-election atmospheres categorized by racial and gendered attacks and stereotypes. Similar to

Sanbonmatsu and Cohen's arguments, the following analysis of Ocasio-Cortez exemplifies that women of color are far from parity and face a different political reality than their male counterparts in American politics. It emphasizes the reality that mainstream political science literature fails to account for the barriers and biases women of color face and reinforces the need for an intersectional approach to fully understand the complexity of the barriers and biases women of color face in American politics.

THE BEGINNING OF ALEXANDRIA OCASIO-CORTEZ

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, commonly known as AOC, is of Puerto Rican descent and took the political scene by storm as the youngest woman ever elected into Congress. Born in the Parkchester neighborhood of the Bronx in 1989, she was raised by her mother and her father. Later in her life, her family moved north to Yorktown in search of a better school for her and her brother. From an adolescent age, the difference in the education opportunities available to her and her cousins solely based on their different zip codes made a lasting impression on her. She quickly realized that the starting line is not the same for everyone. The income inequality and the difference in schooling, economic opportunity, and health outcomes varied across the lens of race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (Jacuinde 2019).

After successfully graduating from high school, she furthered her education at Boston University on a scholarship from Intel. She graduated cum laude from Boston University in 2011 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in international relations and economics. At Boston University, she was the president of *Alianza Latina*, a community organization for Latinx students. Even in the early stages of her career, she was a strong advocate for minority communities and amplified the voices and needs of her peers (Jacuinde 2019). She also interned for the late Senator Ted Kennedy. In her time with Senator Kennedy, she had a first-person window into families'

heartbreaking situations after being separated by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (Hillstrom 2020). Her internship sparked her passion for immigration reform and played a crucial role in shaping her political agenda.

When the financial crisis of 2008 hit, Ocasio-Cortez's family was severely affected. Shortly after, her father suddenly passed away from cancer. The growing expenses and medical bills placed her family's home at the risk of foreclosure. Ocasio-Cortez pulled numerous shifts as a bartender and waitress, further peaking her commitment and interest in the issues faced by the working-class community. She experienced a first-person account of two different realities Americans face- those in the middle class and those of the working class (Jacuinde 2019). Her life itself represents the significance of an intersectional viewpoint as she was raised through the lens of race, class, and gender. Ocasio-Cortez also worked as a volunteer organizer for Bernie Sanders in the South Bronx during the 2016 presidential election. During her time there, she expanded on her skills in electoral organizing and activism (Hillstrom 2020).

After graduating from Boston University, Ocasio-Cortez moved back to the Bronx and focused on community organizing and education. She organized Latinx youth in the Bronx and worked as an Educational Director with the National Hispanic Institute. In her role, she helped DREAMers and undocumented youth foster leadership skills and prepare for college (House.gov). While a strong advocate for equal and diverse representation, Ocasio-Cortez was also a stark proponent of the most pertinent issue affecting minority communities. Drawing on experiences growing up, she used her platform to bring to light the issues that directly affected minority communities and made herself an accessible and relevant voice to her constituents. Not long after, Ocasio-Cortez was inspired by indigenous communities leading demonstrations in opposition to a new pipeline at Standing Rock in South Dakota. After traveling across the

country to join them, the experience reinforced her aspiration of dedicating her life to public service (House.gov).

At 28 years old, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez ran against Democratic Congressman Joe Crowley, a 10-term incumbent and potential Speaker of the House. She ran on a progressive grassroots, non-PAC, or corporate-funded campaign, focused on empowering the voices of marginalized communities and advocating for universal healthcare, the abolishment of ICE, criminal justice reform, and tuition-free college (Biography). She consistently documented her journey on social media platforms, educating her constituents on voting, updating them through pictures and videos throughout her campaign, sharing various articles, and using social media to boost her campaign agenda (Lipsitz 2018). Ocasio-Cortez was very vocal about her personal struggles and triumphs and used her advocacy and organizing experience to be a voice for minority communities and push America's most pressing political issues to the forefront of politics. During her campaign, she got attention from the Brand New Congress, an American political action committee that encourages working-class leaders to run for office (Jacuinde 2019).

Throughout her entire campaign, she was actively redefining the word “political,” exemplifying the need for an intersectional approach to American politics. Although Joe Crowley was predicted to win in New York’s Democratic primaries and become the next Democratic leader, Ocasio-Cortez defeated Joe Crowley in New York’s 14th House District (House.gov). She became the youngest woman ever elected into Congress. She brought hope to constituents all over the country for a more inclusive and representative democracy focused on the intersectional needs of all minority communities alike. She later won her seat in the House of Representatives by defeating Republican opponent Anthony Pappas (Groves 2018). She quickly became a

national icon with her fearless voice, progressive ideals, and as the youngest elected Congresswoman in American history. Ocasio-Cortez brought an unfamiliar voice into Congress and worked to redefine the definition of “political,” working to have it encompass the diverse group of constituents with whom she was working alongside. As a proud Puerto Rican female voice for minority communities and a strong advocate for progressive ideals, Ocasio-Cortez was often a victim of sexist and racist commentary from the public, media, and peers.

Ocasio-Cortez emerged as one of the core members of “the squad,” a group of progressive female lawmakers that surfaced to present a united front against President Trump. Representative Ayanna Pressley of Massachusetts, Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York, Ilhan Omar of Minnesota, and Rashida Tlaib of Michigan quickly gained traction as the future faces of American politics. The four congresswomen coined the term themselves, after Ocasio-Cortez posted an Instagram picture of the four congresswomen seated next to each other and captioned it “Squad” (Hauck 2019). During a news conference, Representative Ayanna Pressley of Massachusetts said, “Our squad includes any person committed to creating a more equitable and just world” (John 2019). As Cohen advocated, direct attention must be paid to account for women of color’s unique experiences and opportunities. The four congresswomen recognize that Congress has never worked for their minority communities and chose to do politics differently to be the change they have longed for in American politics.

Cohen explains that women of color are, for the most part, invisible and therefore experience a continuing marginality in research of American politics. The members of the Squad realize that for Congress to represent and advocate for their minority communities, diverse representation is the key to changing the nature of politics. It is because of that lack of diverse representation in Congress that Cohen advocates for a broader definition of the “political.” “The

squad understands that diversity is meaningless if the measure of success is sameness” (Ransby 2019). Similarly, Cohen argues the only way to improve the lives of women of color is to continue to develop basic knowledge on the political participation of women of color. “They are products of the Movement for Black Lives, #MeToo, Occupy Wall Street and an increasingly militant immigrant rights movement” (Ransby 2019). The Squad members are not afraid to speak up against fellow congress members and advocate for the marginalized communities that are not voiced in politics.

OCASIO-CORTEZ’S LIGHTNING RISE TO CONGRESS

Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s backstory drew in constituents around the United States. “Her Puerto Rican roots, her family’s financial struggles, her achievements as a first-generation college graduate, her experiences as a community organizer, and her employment as a bartender during her campaign” (Hillstrom 2020:11). Cohen explained that women of color utilize nontraditional forms of political organizing, and Ocasio-Cortez’s success was only possible due to the unconventional political organizing efforts she employed. Her life reflected the typical life of her constituents and directly contrasted with the usual resume of a member of Congress. From the onset of her adolescence, Ocasio-Cortez was aware of the different educational opportunities offered to her based solely on her zip code. Later her family struggled to pay basic expenses requiring her to work tirelessly as a bartender and waitress. The relevance of Sanbonmatsu’s argument emerges as the lack of equal access to resources for women of color becomes prevalent. As Sanbonmatsu discussed, potential candidates are put at a significant disadvantage when race intertwines with socioeconomic stratification.

When Ocasio-Cortez took office as a member of the House of Representatives in 2019, she faced unusual scrutiny from her peers and the media. “She’s been described as both an

inspiring and idealistic insurgent, and as a naïve and ill-informed newcomer; as the future of the Democratic party, and as a potential obstacle to its success” (Farmer 2019). Hayes and Lawless assert that male and female candidates face very similar electoral landscapes and perform equally as well on election day. They found that in almost all cases they studied, candidate sex is not discussed and that newsworthiness and polarization of the Republican and Democratic parties drive media coverage. Therefore, they conclude that women do not face substantial bias compared to their male counterparts when running for political office in America. However, throughout the rest of the chapter, the apparent sexist and racist media coverage and candidate communication of Ocasio-Cortez emerges.

While most freshman legislators ordinarily fly under the national radar as they adjust to life as a legislator, Ocasio-Cortez’s every move has generated intense debate and scrutiny since her first day on the campaign trail (Hillstrom 2020). While her diversity and upbringing drew people in, it was also the basis of numerous attacks of sexism and racism. Ocasio-Cortez took advantage of her newfound visibility in United States politics “to amplify her platform of progressive ideas aimed at eliminating economic inequality, achieving social justice, and making the federal government accountable to all citizens” (Hillstrom 2020:12). These ideals made her a target of her peers and various media sources. She represented diversity and inclusion and prided herself on it; it is why she rose to the forefront of politics and why she endured frequent occurrences of racism and sexism.

Many analysts attributed her lightning rise in national prominence to her mastery of social media as a political tool. “Throughout her primary election campaign as well as during her tenure in Congress, Ocasio-Cortez used Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook to forge personal connections with constituents and fans, inspire people to volunteer or donate money, explain and

promote her policy ideas, defend herself from criticism, make the inner workings of government more transparent and accessible to voters, and raise public awareness of problems facing the country” (Hillstrom 2020:184). Ocasio-Cortez redefined the lines of what is “political” and used her platform to improve the lives of minority citizens and raise awareness of the racism and sexism women of color are prone to in American politics. Her diverse political views from many established democrats set her apart, but her various social media strategies to bolster her political agenda and respond to critics' blatant racism and sexism placed her in the political spotlight.

UNDER THE SPOTLIGHT: OCASIO-CORTEZ’S POLITICAL REALITY

Ocasio-Cortez was subjected to numerous attacks centered on the congresswoman’s intelligence, gender, and race from the moment she set foot on the political scene, almost daily making headlines during her campaign and her first few months in office. Ocasio-Cortez did not retreat from the backlash; instead, she utilized social media to respond. In her responses, she fearlessly empowered herself and stood steadfast, refusing to back down from those who sought to tear her down solely based on her gender or race. She did not respond to the attacks with anger but utilized personal anecdotes, inspirational messages, feminist actions, and insights and called for progressive leadership to connect with her constituents (Lewinstein 2019).

In the many instances of sexism that Ocasio-Cortez has had to endure, she was referred to as a “little girl” by Great America PAC Chairman Ed Rollins. He critiqued her Green New Deal on FOX Business Network, her plan to fight climate change, and her proposal to increase taxes for the rich. On January 4, 2019, Rollins commented,

“If you’re going to put her upfront with her mouth, which she now has attention she’s never had before, and you’re going to put the little girl who wants to do pre-Reagan economics and 70 percent taxes, the Democratic women are going to be significantly damaged” (Da Silva 2019).

Hayes and Lawless assert that campaign messages are significantly tied to party I.D and not gender. By that logic, candidate communication, campaign rhetoric, and voter impressions would lack any remnants of gender or race. While Rollins' commentary is driven by partisan divide, he explicitly refers to Ocasio-Cortez as a “little girl,” insulting her through a misogynist comment. As Sanbonmatsu explained, traditional internalized societal expectations enforce the assumption that women are less qualified for politics and often alter their opportunities for political involvement. Rollins directly played into the internalized gender stereotypes resulting from society’s expectations of conventional gender roles.

A day later, on January 5, 2019, Ocasio-Cortez fired back at Chairman Ed Rollins on Twitter,

“GOP loves to insult my intelligence, yet offers *this* as their best + most seasoned opposition to my policy proposals. If anything, this dude is a walking argument to tax misogyny at 100% 😊 Republicans rob everyone the opportunity of real policy debate by resorting to this” (Twitter 2019).

In this particular tweet, Ocasio-Cortez addressed the issue of sexism from her peers. True to her reputation, Ocasio-Cortez went to her constituents on Twitter and expressed her anger at the misogyny of Rollin’s comment. She used the situation to publicize her agenda and reinforce her opposition to “tax misogyny.” She also made a direct hit geared towards Republicans, expressing her frustration with the Republican tendency to avoid a “real debate.” So while party identification is important, and plays a large role in candidate communication and campaign messages, it manifests as attacks through stereotypical commentary based on a candidate's gender.

Ocasio-Cortez has also had to repeatedly defend herself over her clothing, an issue that her male counterparts rarely, if not entirely, have not had to deal with. Fox News and The

Washington Examiner have shamed Ocasio-Cortez “for wearing smart outfits after she said that she would struggle to pay the rent for two residences, one in New York and one in Washington.”

(Da Silva 2019). The Washington Examiner writer, Eddie Scarry, tweeted a photo of

Ocasio-Cortez On November 15, 2018, writing,

“Hill staffer sent me this pic of Ocasio-Cortez they took just now. I'll tell you something: that jacket and coat don't look like a girl who struggles” (Twitter 2018).

Ocasio-Cortez responded,

“If I walked into Congress wearing a sack, they would laugh & take a picture of my backside. If I walk in with my best sale-rack clothes, they laugh & take a picture of my backside. Dark hates light - that's why you tune it out. Shine bright & keep it pushing” (Keneally 2018).

She sent out another tweet shortly after that said,

“The reason journos from @FoxNews to @dcexaminer can't help but obsess about my clothes, rent, or mischaracterize respectful convos as 'fights' is bc as I've said, women like me aren't supposed to run for office—or win. & that's exactly why the BX and Queens sent me here” (Twitter 2018).

Ocasio-Cortez's comments came after "Fox & Friends mocked her for having "expensive tastes for a socialist" after she wore a more than \$3,000 outfit and \$600 shoes for an Interview magazine photoshoot in September, with both items being loaned to her by the magazine" (Da Silva 2019). She noted that the "misogynistic" attempts of those who tried to fill the media with concerns about her clothing and appearance instead of focusing the conversation on her political agenda would not work. Hayes and Lawless argue that sex has little to no influence on candidates' media attention; instead, partisan conflicts and competitiveness determine media coverage. However, Ocasio-Cortez's responses shed light on the underlying issues of sexism and racism she faces from her peers and in the media. Even if the attacks come most stringently from

republicans, they clearly target her as a woman. She uses this individual instance to bring light to women's more significant stereotypical problems in American politics.

A female politician's clothing choice still dominates media outlets almost 20 years after Hillary Clinton's pantsuit portrait. "Paintings of her 20th-century predecessors show a parade of cream-colored gowns, strings of pearls and periwinkle skirts. Clinton rocked a pantsuit in midnight black" (Mateer 2019). The official portrait was unveiled in 2004 and reflected what she thought of herself as a politician and not solely the first lady. Mateer recounted that "critics saw her outfit as an attempt to hide her own femininity, as if she could trick us into thinking she were a man with leg holes alone" (Mateer 2019). Through something as simple as a pantsuit, we can see how the language in campaigns, elections, and media reinforces the notion that politics is a male-dominated field (Sanbonmatsu 2020). When she published her 2017 memoir, "What Happened," she simply explained that she "thought it would be good to do what male politicians do and wear more or less the same thing every day" (Mateer 2019). As opposed to Hayes and Lawless' conclusion that the media's coverage is strictly partisan based and not gender-based, the media coverage of Hillary's pantsuit and its label of "hiding her own femininity" reveals otherwise.

On July 14, 2019, President Donald Trump proudly commented that progressive congresswomen should "go back" and try to fix the "crime-infested places they originally came from" (Smith 2019). Trump appeared to almost all constituents to be referring to a group of non-white congresswomen, Ayanna Pressley of Massachusetts, Rashida Tlaib of Michigan, Ilhan Omar of Minnesota, and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York. Even after he was denounced for being blatantly racist, he doubled down through a series of tweets. Furthermore, while Trump has been known to make racist remarks before, "his willingness to deploy a lowest-rung slur —

one commonly and crudely used to single out the perceived foreignness of non-white, non-Christian people — was largely regarded as beyond the pale” (Roger and Fandos 2019).

Ocasio-Cortez tweeted a lengthy thread in response to Trump's remarks and stood in solidarity with the other congresswomen saying,

“Mr. President, the country I “come from,” & the country we all swear to, is the United States. But given how you’ve destroyed our border with inhumane camps, all at a benefit to you & the corps who profit off them, you are absolutely right about the corruption laid at your feet.”

“You are angry because you don’t believe in an America where I represent New York 14, where the good people of Minnesota elected @IlhanMN, where @RashidaTlaib fights for Michigan families, where @AyannaPressley champions little girls in Boston.”

“You are angry because you can’t conceive of an America that includes us. You rely on a frightened America for your plunder. You won’t accept a nation that sees healthcare as a right or education as a #1 priority, especially where we’re the ones fighting for it. Yet here we are.”

“But you know what’s the rub of it all, Mr. President? On top of not accepting an America that elected us, you cannot accept that we don’t fear you, either. You can’t accept that we will call your bluff & offer a positive vision for this country. And that’s what makes you seethe” (Twitter 2019).

Staying true to her roots, Ocasio-Cortez responded in a thread of tweets where she defended her peers. She amplified her positions on the United States' most pressing issues, such as healthcare, education, inclusion, and immigration camps. Within a few lines, she tackled the racism and sexism from Trump's comment and stood in solidarity with her fellow congresswomen. Hayes and Lawless assert that women face a very similar electoral landscape throughout their campaigns. However, when the United States of America leader is quoted aiming such sexist and racist comments at congresswomen, especially in a highly polarized atmosphere and a white nationalist president, it speaks to the type of campaign and post-election racism and sexism women of color face in the political sphere.

Trump's racist commentary was fueled by discriminatory bias based solely on the congresswomen's race and ethnicity, lacking any remnants of partisan divide. Although Hayes and Lawless conclude that the partisan divide is the most salient component of an election, gender, and racial bias clearly play a large role in candidate communication. It can be seen how women of color face unique experiences at the intersection of race and gender, and an intersectional approach must be studied to understand the challenges and barriers women of color face (Cohen 2003). An intersectional approach deepens the understanding of the different barriers and biases women of color face in American politics. It reframes the lens through which the attacks and discriminatory commentary made towards women of color are understood.

Ocasio-Cortez pointed out the faults of our political system and asserted herself as a force that will not be intimidated or silenced. Ocasio-Cortez turned her platform on Twitter into a part of her brand and a foundational element of her job. All in one tweet, she reminds her constituents of the pressing problems plaguing our community, the inhumane camps, the lack of universal healthcare, the absence of education as a priority, and the inherent racism and sexism towards women of color in politics. To bring it all together, she reminds the constituents of her legitimacy. Although men in power may try, they cannot deter women and women of color from fulfilling their elected position. Even in today's political climate, with the number of women in Congress higher than ever, women of color are still explicitly subjected to racist and sexist attacks. Hence Cohen's emphasis on the need for a framework in which politics includes the study of women of color.

Similarly, in another account, Ocasio-Cortez was called a "f*cking b*tch" by one of her fellow congress members. In their work, Hayes and Lawless emphasize that women do not face "inhospitable campaign trails." They also assert that sex plays a minor role in shaping candidate

communication. Yet such an analysis falls short when faced with vulgar language such as the words “f*cking b*tch” used not only by anyone but by a fellow representative targeted at one of their peers. “B*tch” is used in specific as a derogatory term targeting Ocasio-Cortez as a woman.

On July 21, 2020, Manu Raju, a CNN Senior Congressional Correspondent, reported that Ted Yoho, a United States Representative, allegedly called Ocasio-Cortez a “f*cking b*tch.” Ocasio-Cortez was walking up the east front steps of the Capitol to cast a vote Monday afternoon when both Yoho and Texas GOP Rep. Roger Williams approached her as they were walking down the steps (Raju 2020). Williams “literally started hollering about throwing urine,” Ocasio-Cortez said. Yoho claimed that he did not use vulgar language at or with Ocasio-Cortez; however, a Hill reporter confirmed he heard him.

Ocasio-Cortez tweeted,

“I never spoke to Rep. Yoho before he decided to accost me on the steps of the nation’s Capitol yesterday. Believe it or not, I usually get along fine w/ my GOP colleagues. We know how to check our legislative sparring at the committee door. But hey, “b*tches” get stuff done” (Twitter 2020).

Ocasio-Cortez immediately took to her constituents and took hold of the narrative. She responded, “But hey, “b*tches” get stuff done,” a catchphrase that quickly became a power source for many American women. Representative Yoho’s uncalled-for vulgar language further exemplifies the reality that Ocasio-Cortez could not get the respect she earned from her peers even after a rigorous campaign trail. In her tweet, Ocasio-Cortez rerouted the conversation to empower her strength and capability as a member of congress. Ocasio-Cortez directly called William on his denial and tagged him in a tweet where she put him on the spot for not intervening while she was being “violently harassed.” By responding to a previous tweet about

the situation, she inserted herself into the conversation and rerouted it to shed light on the shortcomings of Congressman Williams.

Ocasio-Cortez responded to a tweet stating,

“Gotta love Republican courage from Rep @RogerWilliamsTX: when he undeniably sees another man engaged in virulent harassment of a young woman, just pretend you never saw it in the most cartoonish manner possible and keep pushing. (He’s lying, by the way. He joined in w/Yoho)” (Twitter 2020).

Ocasio-Cortez, staying true to her reputation for her outspokenness, “had her most norm-shattering moment” as she denounced the abuse faced by women in Congress across the nation on the House floor. “The media-savvy Ms. Ocasio-Cortez had sprung into action to create a disruptive and viral event” (Broadwater and Edmondson 2020). She had her aides email invitations to her fellow lawmakers to join her on the house floor to ensure that everyone knew that she, and her fellow congresswomen, would not stand for this type of treatment from their colleagues. Ocasio-Cortez continuously showed her constituents that she would not be silenced and stand up for herself and her candidacy, even to her fellow congress members.

Amplifying her political voice, Ocasio-Cortez invited numerous female members of Congress to come forward, and numerous congresswomen recounted similar experiences in the past where they were accosted, blatantly belittled, and mistreated by their fellow male colleagues. Following her reputation for cultural upheaval, her openness and passion for awareness of the mistreatment of women in Congress shook the House floor. “More even than the profanity uttered on the House floor, where language is carefully regulated, what unfolded over the next hour was a remarkable moment of cultural upheaval on Capitol Hill” (Broadwater and Edmondson 2020).

Not only did Ocasio-Cortez set an unprecedented conversation on the House floor, but she also shed light on the previous mistreatment and blatant sexism numerous congresswomen faced. Hayes and Lawless' results show that systematic bias for women appears to be limited at best; however, numerous congresswomen have faced explicit bias, racism, and even sexism. "Representative Pramila Jayapal, Democrat of Washington, recounted how a male Republican lawmaker had once lashed out at her during a debate on the House floor, sternly calling Ms. Jayapal, 54, a "young lady" and saying that she did not "know a damn thing" about what she was talking about." 30-year-old Representative Debbie Wasserman Schultz, Democrat of Florida, recounted being called a "20-something lawmaker" on two different occasions, one in Florida's statehouse and again as a member of Congress. Many wish to optimistically argue that women no longer face any systematic bias in the political realm, but sadly these congressmen are an affront to that belief. "Few women here watching have not felt a man's bullying breath or menacing finger in our face as we were told exactly where our place was at work," Ms. Wasserman Schultz said (Broadwater and Edmondson 2020).

When Ocasio-Cortez made an appearance on "The Late Show with Stephen Colbert" on January 22nd, 2019, Colbert asked the congresswoman, "On a scale from zero to some, how many f*cks do you give?," and Ocasio-Cortez proceeded to form a circle with her hand and responded by only saying, "Zero" (Neal 2019). Media outlets burst into a frenzy the following day, misleading headlines were everywhere, and Ocasio-Cortez was quoted saying, "I give 'zero' f*cks about upsetting senior Democrats." Ocasio-Cortez went to Twitter to reach out to her constituents and corrected the misleading quotes,

"I actually didn't say this, so while I know "brown women cursing" drives clicks, maybe you accurately quote the whole exchange instead of manipulating people into thinking I said this sentence instead of just the word "zero" (Twitter 2019).

While it has been argued that headlines are often exaggerated or misleading to attract more readers, misquoting a person in power, more specifically, a member of Congress, is not typical. “Stereotypes that have followed women, especially women of color, do measurably more damage to their character in comparison with their white male counterparts. The media continue to perpetuate the stereotypes and illustrate images of women being overly “emotional” or impulsive” (Neal 2019). Ocasio-Cortez tied the situation to the subtle racism and sexism perpetuated by the headlines by stating “brown women cursing” and enforcing the notion that her identity should not be used to “drive clicks.” Ocasio-Cortez shared her frustration in her tweet over the direct misquote purposefully phrased to elicit a reaction from the readers and members of her party. Her tweet exemplified the need for a complete and diversified account of the different barriers and opportunities women of color encounter (Cohen 2003).

Hayes and Lawless discuss that sex plays little to no difference in candidates’ media attention. They conclude that newsworthiness, instead of gender, drives media coverage, and journalists reflect on the candidate’s campaign messages, not sex. However, Ocasio-Cortez responded by only saying “zero” but was drastically misquoted by multiple media outlets. As Sanbonmatsu explained, women and women of color are likely to have different political experiences because of prejudice and stereotypes. Similarly, Ocasio-Cortez sheds light on the underlying racism and sexism used as clickbait, portraying her as the “brown women cursing,” clearly exemplifying the role that gender and racism play in media coverage—proving the need for direct attention to be paid to account for women of color’s unique experiences and opportunities to understand the political activity of women of color (Cohen 2003).

In the following tweet, Ocasio-Cortez points out how her male colleagues do not get the same coverage as leading female politicians. Regardless of race, female politicians are almost always stereotyped by their peers in Congress and the media. Ocasio-Cortez went on to give her followers a lesson on reporting:

“This reinforces lazy tropes about women leaders in media:

- Older + seasoned, but unlikeable
- Passionate, but angry
- Smart, but crazy
- Well-intentioned, but naive
- Attractive, but uninformed or gaffe-prone

It’s unoriginal, lazy, and men don’t get the same either/or coverage” (Twitter 2019).

Like Sanbonmatsu, Ocasio-Cortez shared her frustration with the overplayed stereotypes against women in American politics. “Gender roles in society, the sexual division of labor, and racial and ethnic in-equalities have combined to advantage White men in politics” (Sanbonmatsu 2020).

Ocasio-Cortez highlighted the shortcomings in media outlets that propagate these stereotypes that are sexist and inaccurate. She reminds her constituents that she is not only present on social media for agenda setting alone but also to voice her concerns and tackle issues that are plaguing the political community, including those of sexism and racism. Ocasio-Cortez put media outlets on the spot and directly called them out for enabling these types of “lazy tropes about women leaders in media.” As Cohen explained, the solution to the inclusion of women of color in politics cannot happen without the combination of the work of scholars in various disciplines outside of political science, the media included (Cohen 2003).

Although Hayes and Lawless argue that misperceptions of bias are barriers to entry into politics, Sanbonmatsu disagrees and notes that recent public opinion polls “document widespread sexism, issue stereotypes, trait stereotypes, and general skepticism about the appropriateness of

women wielding political power” (Sanbonmatsu 2020). The gendered language in campaigns and elections reinforces the belief that politics is meant to be a male-dominated field, pushing female representatives to the outskirts. Moreover, Sanbonmatsu explains that for candidates of color, stereotypes and gatekeeper skepticism have further reduced their opportunities, such as the stereotypes Ocasio-Cortez tweeted against.

Ocasio-Cortez was never one to shy away from voicing her concerns and exposing what she saw wrong within her political community. In a Finance Committee hearing, Ocasio-Cortez exposed the corruption in campaign finance and eloquently voiced her concerns. On February 27th, 2019, following the hearing, she retweeted a tweet from Mitra Kalita that read,

“Seeing the words “prepared” and “authentic” to describe @AOC, often with surprise that she’s made it so far. This is the superpower of women of color: to prep more than everyone else, read the room, yet stay true to yourself because the alternative ain’t worth it. Just guessing” (Twitter 2019).

Ocasio-Cortez retweeted,

“People think it’s a joke when folks say we have to work 2x as hard for the same seat. Whether you believe it or not, the upside is when we do get here, we’re used to being held to a diff bar. To being doubted. To getting new hoops thrown @ us last min. So we know how to perform” (González-Ramírez 2019).

Ocasio-Cortez is well-versed in the challenges she has faced as a woman and as a woman of color. In her response, she “acknowledges the challenges, adversity, and strength of herself, and other women of color” (Lewinstein 2019:51). As Cohen advocated, this exemplifies the need for the complete presentation of the different barriers and opportunities women of color face in the political sphere. Hayes and Lawless conclude that women raise as much money and votes in general elections and primaries and are as likely to win as their male counterparts. They fail to acknowledge the double barriers women face, the different bars they are held to, and the criticism

and sexism they face. Ocasio-Cortez and Kalita specifically mention needing to “prep more than everyone else” and having to “work 2x as hard for the same seat.” They refer to the additional barriers they have to face as women of color by consistently “being held to a different bar,” “being doubted,” and “getting new hoops thrown @ us [them] last min.” Sanbonmatsu explains that the assumption that women are less qualified for politics alters their political involvement opportunities. Political institutions, party organizations, campaigns, actors, voters, and donors may be biased against women due to societal expectations and norms about their capabilities and roles.

Conversely to what Hayes and Lawless conclude, women do not face similar electoral landscapes throughout their campaigns and after their election to office. Gender works alongside race to decide which groups have access to the formal and informal resources and opportunities necessary to win political office (Sanbonmatsu 2020). Women, and women of color, specifically need to work twice as hard for the same opportunities and seats in political office as their male counterparts.

Ocasio-Cortez gives herself credit for how hard she has had to work to become a congresswoman in a political atmosphere that is still seeded with racism and sexism. Mitra Kalita shares her frustration that various media outlets recounted Ocasio-Cortez as “prepared” and “authentic” at the hearing, although no less should have been expected as a representative. Kalita, as a woman of color herself, is well aware of “how intelligent, poised, prepared she must be to have made it this far at all (Lewinstein 2019:51). Instances like these shed light on the racism and sexism that still lingers in American politics. In her response, Ocasio-Cortez shares that being held to a different bar and doubted is not new to her and has been something she has constantly battled since her campaign trail.

ALEXANDRIA OCASIO-CORTEZ: THE YOUNGEST WOMAN TO SERVE IN CONGRESS

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez stormed the political scene as the youngest woman to ever serve in congress. She drew attention as “the young, Latina, working-class “girl from the Bronx” and her slate of unapologetically progressive ideas into the national spotlight” (Hillstrom 2020:10). Her origin story was defined by her heritage, experience working with the community, and progressive ideals. With the power she came to have, her social media platform was also the scene of numerous attacks on her character, heritage, background, education, and legitimacy.

Ocasio-Cortez prided herself on her Latina heritage and handled each interaction of racism or sexism with an unapologetic response of strength. She never backed down to her critics, defending herself and her peers. From the onset of her career, she utilized social media as a political tool to connect with constituents and personally respond to criticism. “Her tweets in this category are engaging, interactive, reflective, feminist, personal, and inspirational” (Lewinstein 2019:51). They are a testament to her authenticity because she contributes to trending conversations and interacts with her supporters and critics to blend inspirational messages and political agendas into succinct threads. When she took office, Ocasio-Cortez had a larger social media following than the sixty other newly elected House Democrats combined. “She comes across as a very earnest, passionate person, not as a politician or a brand” (Friedman 2018).

She responded to individual tweets and would retweet and highlight her endorsements. This allowed her to control the narrative of her political career and push her progressive political ideas to the forefront of American politics. “However, unlike other politicians who left their Twitter accounts in the hands of their communications professionals, Ocasio-Cortez composed her own tweets” (Relman 2019). Moreover, Ocasio-Cortez’s responses through social media set

her apart from the norm. Women of color resonate with a political representative who experiences the same battles; her responses echo with women of color who feel their challenges and reliance are being recognized. “She argues in threads, dunks on semi-randos, and is ready to mock the attempted sick own, harvesting and redirecting its power” (Miller 2018).

Ocasio-Cortez’s resilience and determination pushed her to the forefront of the political spotlight. She had no issues speaking her mind, and older lawmakers never experienced a young woman of color with as much resilience. The “congresswoman’s remarkable influence forced others to discuss her ideas, respond to her policy proposals, and emulate her tactics” (Hillstrom 2020:178).

Contrary to Danny Hayes and Jennifer Lawless’s argument that women do not encounter systematic differences in their campaign rhetoric, media coverage, and voter impression, there were multiple instances of blatant sexism and racism in candidate communication and media coverage in these short selections. While they concluded that systematic bias is at best limited, Ocasio-Cortez was often put under the spotlight and directly attacked with racist and sexist commentary. While some attacks had partisan components, they were manifested through racial and gendered stereotypical frameworks. As Sanbonatsu and Cohen argue, these additional barriers and biases are present. They must be acknowledged and eliminated to ensure that all constituents know women who run for political office will not face additional barriers and biases. The barriers and biases women of color, such as Ocasio-Cortez, faced in American politics cannot be understood within an intersectional framework that accounts for the intersectionality of race and gender.

CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION

“Diversity is what happens when you have representation of various groups in one place. Representation is what happens when groups that haven’t previously been included, are included. Intersectionality is what happens when we do everything through the lens of making sure that no one is left behind. More than surface-level inclusion, or merely making sure everyone is represented, intersectionality is the practice of interrogating the power dynamics and rationales of how we can be together.”

—Alicia Garza, *The Purpose of Power: How We Come Together When We Fall Apart*

(Garza 2020:146).

This thesis aimed to answer the research question of whether or not mainstream political science literature adequately captures the barriers and biases women of color face at the intersectionality of race and gender. The introductory chapter highlighted the link between the status of democracy and women of color's representation. Without a government that reflects the diversity of its citizens, America's democracy will never be considered legitimate. A brief history of women's suffrage is presented, illustrating the hardships and struggles women have faced to earn a place in American politics. The frustration with the current political climate and lack of representation in Congress, intensified by Trump's presidency, fueled the increasing number of female candidates running for political office today. However, women of color are still far from parity in American politics.

The literature review examined the work of Danny Hayes and Jennifer Lawless, Kira Sanbonmatsu, and Cathy Cohen. The chapter depicted that mainstream political science literature does not account for the barriers and biases women of color face in American politics. It reinforced the need for an intersectional approach to fully understand the barriers and biases women of color face. Hayes and Lawless concluded that women do not face systematic differences in campaign rhetoric, media coverage, content, and voter impressions. They asserted that partisan conflicts, as opposed to gender, determine election coverage, and sex has little influence. Sanbonmatsu and Cohen disagreed, arguing that women of color are far from parity in American politics. Contrary to Hayes and Lawless' argument, women do not face similar electoral landscapes throughout their campaigns compared to their male counterparts. Women of color, in specific, face a political landscape categorized by racist and sexist remarks and commentary. While Hayes and Lawless conclude that gender no longer affects women's campaigns for political office, they fail to account for women of color's experiences.

Kira Sanbonmatsu asserted that although the number of female candidates is at an all-time high, women are far from parity. She explained that gender and race have always worked hand in hand to determine which individuals have access to the resources and opportunities critical for winning political office in America. She reinforced the need for an intersectional approach to fully understand the barriers and biases women of color face at the intersectionality of race and gender. Similarly, Cathy Cohen explained that existing research cannot be applied to women of color, and a redefinition of the word "political" is essential. Because women of color are largely invisible in American politics, they have consistently experienced a continuing marginality in American politics research. Cohen reinforced the need for an intersectional

approach to account for women of color's unique experiences to understand the political activity of women of color.

The literature review then briefly explained the "double trouble" of being a woman of color in American politics. Not only do women of color face additional barriers and bias through the lens of gender, but race and gender overlap to form intersectional barriers and bias. Women of color bolster the legitimacy of democracy, and their intersectional identities provide them with unique perspectives on politics and allow them to focus on issues pertinent to their minority communities. They incorporate an intersectional take on policy and legislation through their intersectional identities and symbolize inclusivity for their communities.

The following chapter drew upon Cohen and Sanbonmatsu's proposed intersectional framework through a case study on Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Contrary to what Hayes and Lawless asserted, Ocasio-Cortez's political career was filled with racist and sexist commentary from her peers and the media. Gender and race categorize the political sphere and form significant barriers and biases for women of color in American politics. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez shook the political scene as the youngest woman ever elected into Congress. Raised in the Bronx and of Puerto Rican descent, she strongly advocated for minority and underprivileged communities throughout her career. She stood for equal and diverse representation and utilized her platform to make her an accessible and relevant voice to her constituents.

Ocasio-Cortez actively redefined the word "political," intertwining an intersectional viewpoint into the realm of American politics. Even when it appears that political identification explains the attacks and biases she endured, an intersectionality approach depicts that the manifestation of the attacks are in specifically racialized and misogynous terms such that it

considers women of color politicians as double trouble. While Hayes and Lawless argued that women in American politics face the same political landscape as their male counterparts, that is not the case, exemplified by Ocasio-Cortez's political career.

As depicted by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's case study, mainstream political science fails to account for the barrier and biases women of color face at the intersectionality of race and gender. The barriers and biases women of color face in American politics cannot be understood without an intersectional framework that accounts for the experiences of women of color. An intersectional approach reveals that women's political equality is needed to achieve equality in other domains. Ocasio-Cortez's political career depicts that mainstream political science literature will never adequately account for the barriers and biases women of color face at the intersectionality of race and gender without an intersectional approach. Without an intersectional approach, the complexity of the barriers and biases women of color face in American politics can never be fully understood and remedied.

APPENDIX

Figure 1. Men and Women in the 117th American Congress:

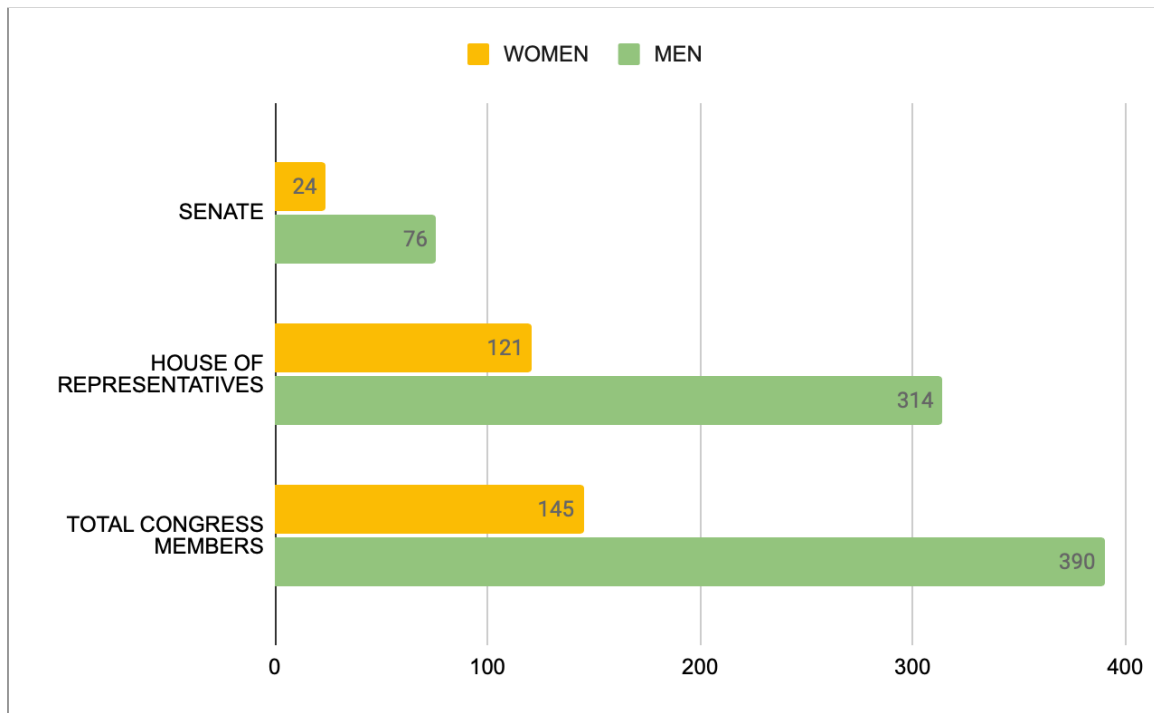


Figure 2. Women in the American Congress Overtime:

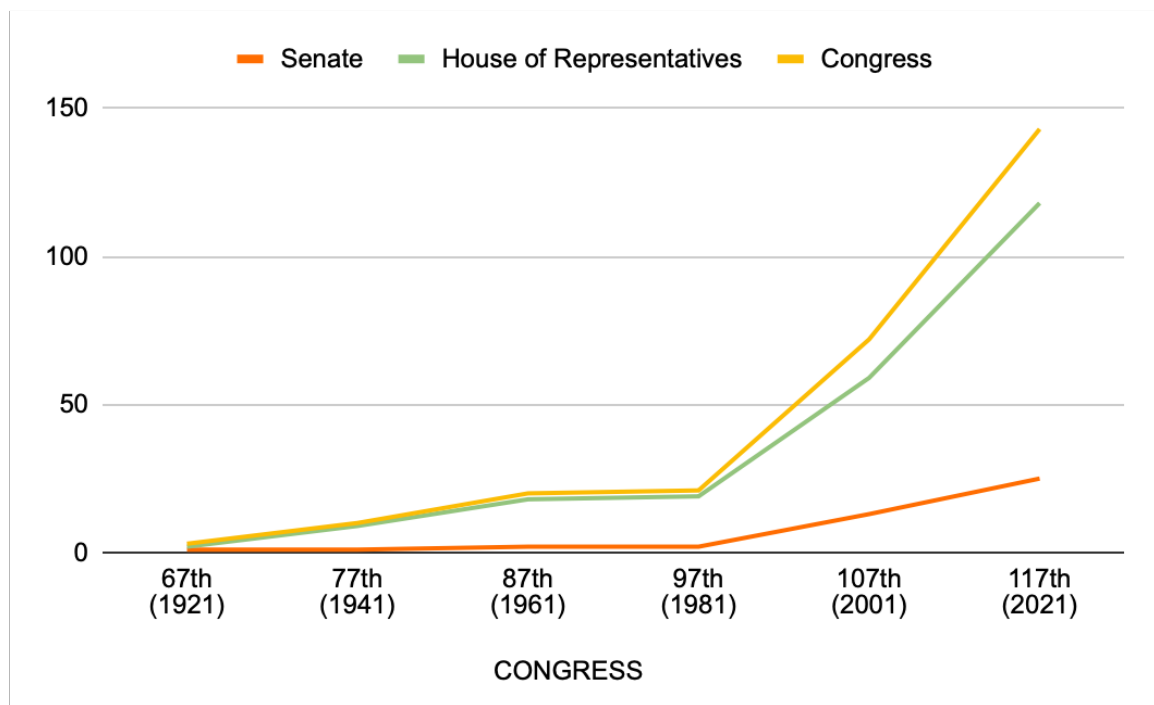


Figure 3. The Composition of the 117th American Congress:

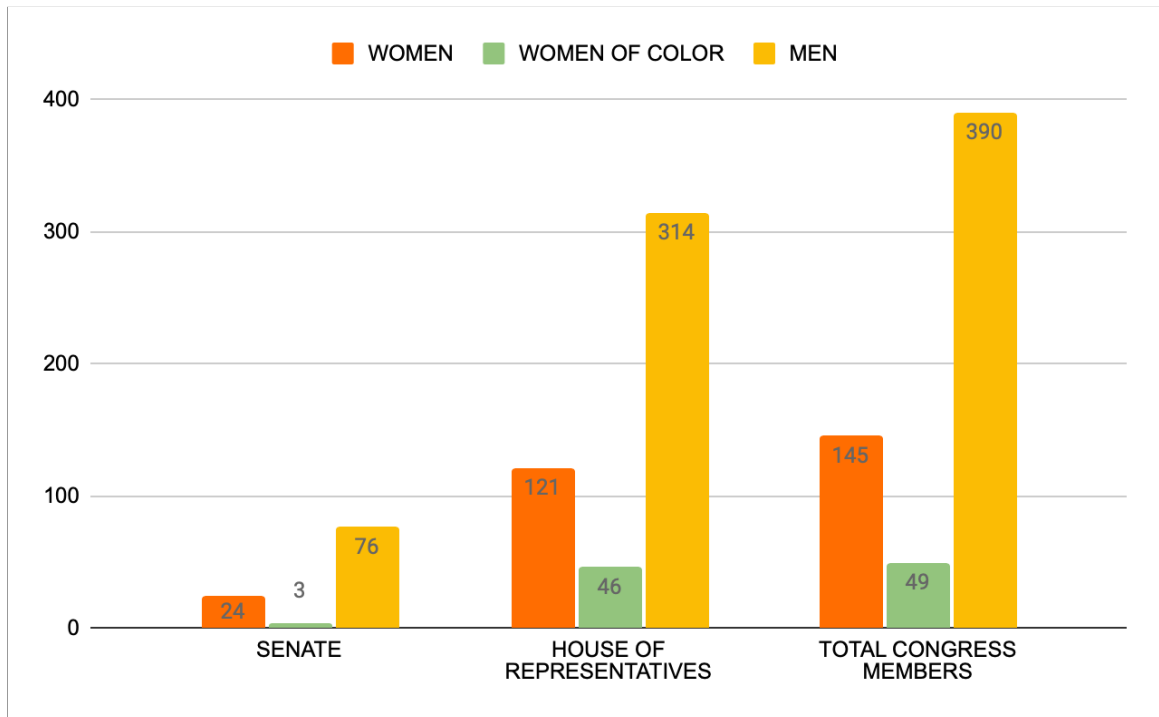
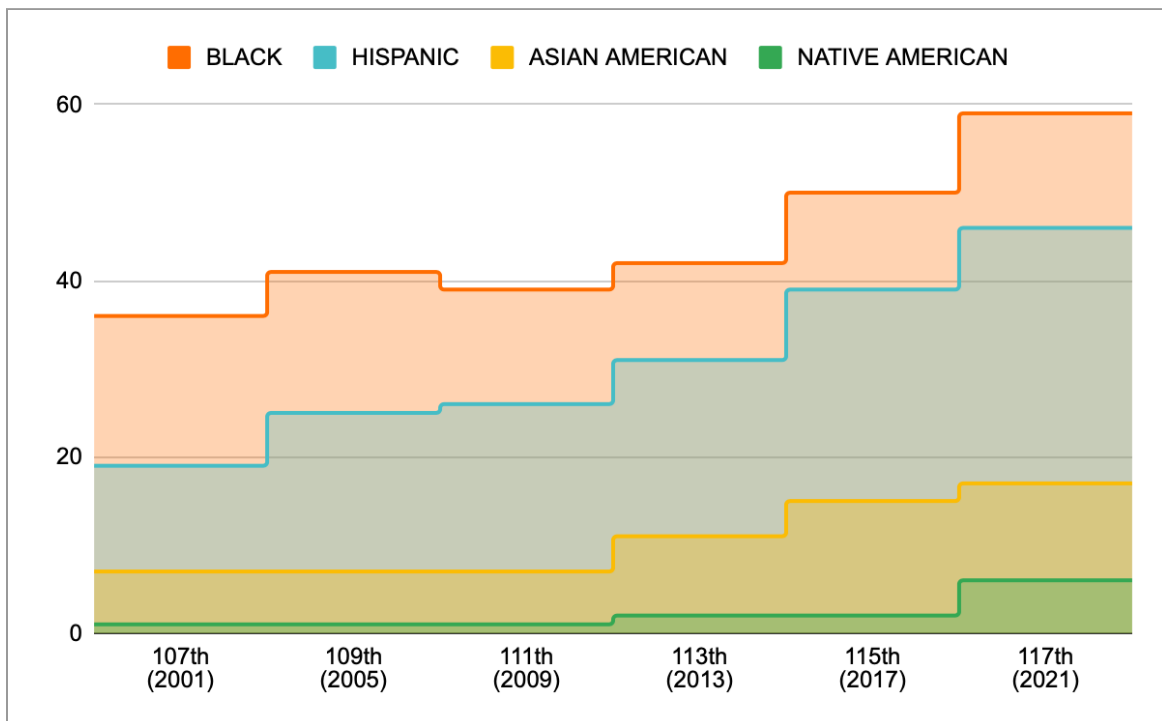


Figure 4. Non-White Members of Congress Overtime:



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